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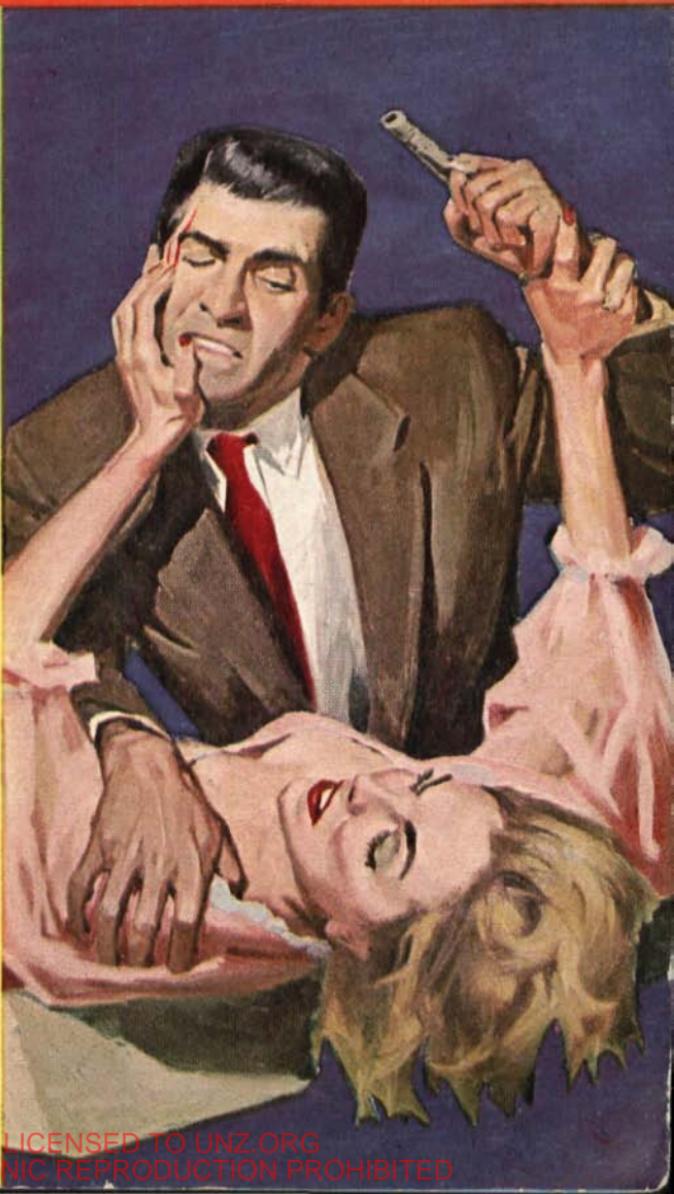
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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MAY, 1963

Vol. 12, No. 6

A LONG EXCITING NOVELET

THE NAMELESS CLUE

By HELEN McCLOY

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MURDER MOST

THE
NEW
MIKE SHAYNE
NOVELET

by
Brett
Halliday

Who'd want to kill a ninety-year old man just because he was worth millions? Mike Shayne's defense against murder turned up a couple of rank amateurs playing a deadly game.



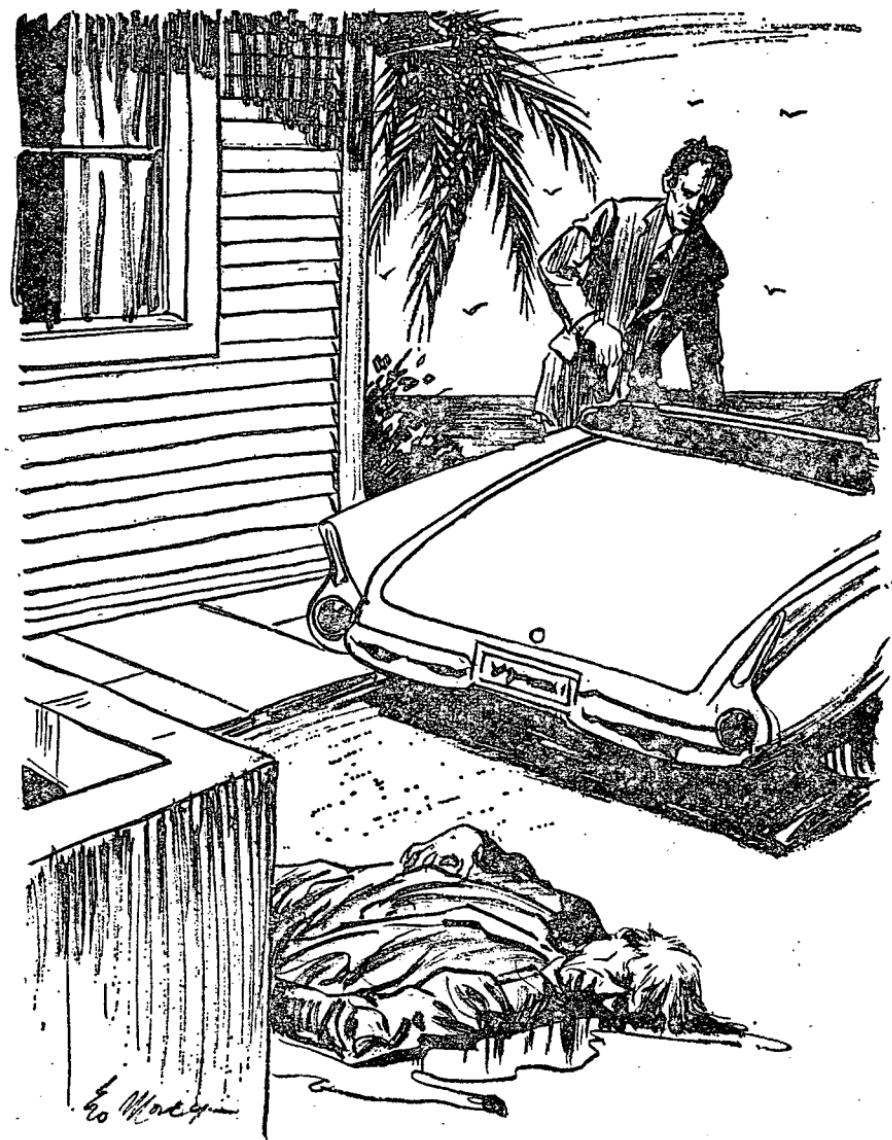
WHEN HE REACHED the highway, Michael Shayne pointed the nose of his car north and increased his speed to eighty miles an hour. The long white ribbon of concrete before him lay washed and new in the bright Miami sunlight. Visibility was perfect. Green rows of palm trees bordered the distant horizon.

Shayne wrinkled his eyes against the glare, fished out a cigarette and thought about Hat Raymond. It was a helluva long way to go to see a client.

The oldest living male resident of Florida had phoned him early that morning. The voice on the long distance line had been crackling, sere and ancient. Like a wheeze from the past. Shayne had been surprised that Hat Raymond was still alive.

© 1963, by Brett Halliday

UNWELCOME



"What can I do for you, Mr. Raymond?"

"From what I hear about you—plenty, son." A pleasant Southern accent tinged Hat Raymond's dry voice. "Fact is, I need a smart young feller to do some investigating for me, Shayne."

"That so?"

"Yes. Somebody seems to have some ideas about killing old Hat."

Hat Raymond sounded vinegary and hard-boiled. "I heard about you too, Hat," Shayne said. "You once shot a man by way of expressing your disapproval of the way he was fleecing farmers."

"That was way back—almost fifty years ago," the old man roared. "And damn justifiable. Why, in those times, a man had to hang onto what was his like it was his last pair of shoes. That's a fact, but—I didn't call you to talk about that, did I?"

"No, I don't think so."

Raymond's voice fell a register. "Shayne, you willing to come out to my place for a talk? It's too much of a trip for me to go to Miami. And I'm thinking maybe I could use you right away."

"It's my business," Shayne said. "But perhaps you ought to go the local law if you suspect someone is trying to harm you."

"No," the old man said firmly. "Not yet. That's why I want to see you first. I can pay. It's worth a lot to me to ease my mind. I'm lame some. Sprained this leg of

mine just two days ago. It could have been an accident but—" The voice got cautious. "I'd like it fine if you drove out, Shayne. Point Lomar. Know where that is?"

"I think so," Shayne said. A good seventy miles from his Flagler Street office. Two hour drive. "What time?"

"Soon as you can make it. This won't keep. Fact is, I'm expecting my granddaughter and her husband back from Tampa this evening and I'd sure like to clear this business up before they get here."

"All right," Shayne said. "I'll leave in about a half an hour." He checked his wrist watch. "Look for me about twelve thirty. That should do it. Anything else you want to tell me now?"

Hat Raymond chuckled.

"Nothing I tell you now would do anything for you. You have to talk to me first. See the place where the railing on the portico was busted. Then you can tell me. You're bright, Shayne. I heard how bright you were. That's why I want you. I think maybe you could help me and make yourself a pretty dollar while you're doing it."

"Fair enough, Hat. I'll be seeing you."

"And don't forget your gun, Shayne."

With no more than that and a click of the receiver at the other end of the line, Hat Raymond had hung up.

Shayne had sat at his desk in the office for a full five minutes, smoking a cigarette and thinking. His angular body and rangy shoulders hunched speculatively. He was well inured to the type of client who called up and talked of threats and attempts of murder. Sometimes, it was pure imagination, distilled by too many TV shows and lurid paperbacks. With an old man, there was never any telling, either. Still, Shayne had been a detective too long not to know that in a world of violence and greed, all inhumane things were sooner or later possible.

Anyhow, Shayne respected the oldest living male resident in Florida.

After the phone call, Shayne had briefed himself on Hat Raymond before setting out on the long drive. A call to Timothy Rourke of the *Miami Daily News* had been a gold mine as always. It was nice to have a newspaperman for a friend.

"Hat Raymond!" Rourke said. "The old gent dates back to the Seminoles. When this whole area was mostly swamp and jungle. That old timer hung onto land until he was a corner on real estate. No telling how much he's worth now. You know how the Miami area is booming yearly. An inch of earth is worth more than uranium. I'll bet he's worth a few million right now as old as he is."

"How old would that be, Tim?"



"Ninety if he's a day. He came down from Georgia someplace and settled here way back when. Tried to find gold or the Fountain of Youth or something. But he hung onto his acres and I'll bet Point Lomar is almost all his as far as the eye can see. With all the buildings gone up around there in the last ten years, the old boy must be worth a mint."

"Why do they call him Hat?"

Timothy Rourke laughed. "It's a bit of the Old South, Mike. He once shot the hat off a guy who didn't take his lid off when he passed a lady. Became a legend up at Point Lomar. Hat Raymond's

first name was something like Ebenezer."

"Gentleman of the old school, huh?"

"Hat Raymond is the old school, Mike."

Shayne's rangy body grew resolute behind the wheel. The road was racing by as the car gobbled up miles. Hat Raymond's strange call filled Shayne's mind. His thoughts were full of oldtimers, Florida's history and how the land had changed since the old man's time. Modern buildings springing up all over the good green Florida soil; the population boom that had reached astronomical figures. Progress was rolling on, leaving the Hat Raymonds behind. Man, was indeed, not as permanent as concrete nor as durable as a palm tree.

Point Lomar sprawled ahead. Tall, white buildings formed on the horizon. As small as the area was, one had the impression of entering a vestpocket edition of a city. Before he reached the white billboards that proclaimed entrance, a fork in the highway proudly announced Point Lomar.

Shayne took the cut, finding a climbing road that left the Atlantic at his back. Through a mass of trees, he spied the house. It was a ranch type edifice set on a rise overlooking Point Lomar. Shayne shifted into low gear and cruised up to the sun-drenched lawn that bordered the place.

He realized how quiet everything was when he cut the engine. Silence settled over the scene. A hawk cried in the trees behind the house. Shayne dismounted and walked quickly toward the gate. There was no one in sight. He had rather expected the old man to be sitting on the portico in a wheel chair or a rocker, waiting for him.

There were screens on all the windows and the front door hung open. Shayne, vaguely curious, hurried his step.

He nearly stumbled over the old man's body at the base of the steps leading up to the portico. He halted, his eyes taking in a quick survey of the scene.

Hat Raymond, if indeed it was he, was lying crumpled on the ground. A trickle of blood was coursing down the leathery old face.

But Hat Raymond was still breathing—and alive.

Mike Shayne bent over him quickly, his irritation dissolving into genuine anger.

II

THE OLD MAN said feebly, "No, no doctors, Shayne," when he finally came awake. Shayne's first aid had consisted mainly of cold water, wrist-rubbing and moving Hat Raymond onto the portico where a lounge served as a place to lie down. "Cowards. Sneaking up on an old man and hitting him

from behind. They'll kill me yet."

Shayne had not missed the broken section of portico railing. A splintered rail of wood dangled crazily. "Easy, Hat. It's only a bump but don't stir yourself."

"You *are* Shayne?" Raymond rubbed his head, winced and cocked an eye at his rescuer. His face was as leathery and timeless as the Florida sands.

Shayne nodded, eyes surveying the portico.

"Tell me what you remember, Hat. If you don't want a doctor, you must be up to questions. Did you see anything at all?"

"Ahhh!" The old man looked sour. "They can't kill an old duffer like me. I was out here, waiting on you, figuring it was high time you showed and *powie*, something hit me."

"Were you alone in the house?"

"Course I was. Didn't I tell you Effie and Tod were coming back tonight from Tampa?"

"Sure you did," Shayne said kindly. "Your granddaughter and her husband. Just checking! I see the broken railing but maybe you'd better get to your reason for wanting me to come. It looks like you might need some protection at that."

The old man shuddered. "Should have had my hat on. That bump hurts some. Well, Shayne, I need you all right. What about a drink?"

"Later," Shayne said patiently.



"I want to hear your story first."

"Impatient cuss, huh?" Hat Raymond chuckled. "I figured as much. Okay, here's the picture. I made out a new will leaving all my money, and it's considerable, to my granddaughter. That's Effie. You'll see her later, and that new husband of her's. That's Tod Bascom. Which is all right with me—I'm glad to see Effie married. But

you see, Shayne, I started writing her about six months ago and then told her about the will.

"Before I knew it," the old man was scowling, "she'd gotten married and came down here with her husband to live with me. I didn't invite them—but I didn't mind. I figured it would give me a chance to make up to my granddaughter for all the years we've been apart." Hat Raymond paused, slightly crestfallen.

"Don't stop now," Shayne urged gently.

The old man's face hardened. "That's what bothers me. It was their idea to come live with me *after* I told Effie about the will. She never cared before about me. Hadn't heard from her for ten years—that was when her mother died. I think she blamed me for that somehow. It's just peculiar that's all. Me busting my leg on that porch and now getting hit over the head like this. And what's the use telling you about the other couple of times. I'd hate to think my granddaughter had anything to do with them. It has to be that husband of hers who's in back of it all."

"You really think it's Tod Bascom?"

Raymond spanked his thigh. "That's just it, Shayne. I'm trying to be fair about this—but I want to know for sure. I can't help feeling he's a fortune hunter who married Effie because of the will. But

according to them, they were married six months ago, *before* I told her about the will. Still, when they showed up here awhile back to live with me, I started worrying about it. Especially after what's been happening to me. And now this porch business and last week somebody left the motor running in the garage!"

Shayne tugged at his earlobe. "You could be mistaken and all of this could be just accidental."

"Not when the garage door shuts behind you and you got to break it down to save your neck. But you're the detective, aren't you? It's up to you to figure out if they're fixing to stir up some trouble. Right?"

"You mean like killing you to collect the inheritance?"

"Why not?" The old man said. "There's millions in my pocket."

Shayne said, "Is it barely possible you got too much sun out here on the porch and fell down and hit your head?"

"Not on your tintype. I may be old but I'm not feeble minded. Somebody crowned me, that's for sure."

"If you say so."

"I do say so! Now are you working for me or against me?"

"For," said Shayne. "How much do you figure the job is worth?"

Raymond's eyes slitted. "I won't horsetrade with you. You clear up my mind about Effie and her

husband and I'll pay you two thousand dollars."

Before Mike Shayne could ask him how to start going about that, there was a commotion behind them. Hat Raymond sprang erect, for all his stiff joints, his face coming apart in amazement. "Well, I'll be damned! Here they are now, Shayne. Back earlier than I figured by the look of things."

Two people had started up the walk. Behind them, Shayne saw another car near his own. A sedan. He berated himself for not hearing them drive up. A bad sign he was getting careless or had been too engrossed in Hat Raymond's story.

"Grandpa! What happened—are you all right? Did you fall again?"

The girl was young, slender, brunette and very prim looking. A rescued spinster if Shayne had ever seen one. Her eyes shown with embarrassment and there was a halting sincerity to her tone. The man with her was young too. Tall, powerful and quietly thoughtful. His eyes searched Shayne's face without a flicker of warmth.

"Blast it," Hat Raymond cried. "Got no call coming back early! Surprises are no good for men of my age. Shayne, this here's Effie and Tod. We were just talking about you."

"Oh." Tod Bascom's eyes were mildly surprised. His handshake



was perfunctory. Effie Bascom nodded nervously, apparently still concerned about her grandfather.

"He stumbled and fell," Shayne said quietly. "Luckily I was here to help. Hat and I are old friends."

"Grandpa," Effie said. "I'm glad we came back so soon. Fact is, Tod didn't think we should stay away too long. So we hurried back. He finished his business sooner than he expected anyway."

Shayne nodded. "What kind of business is that?" he asked politely.

"Real estate," Tod Bascom said, not without pride of a kind. "Things are really booming in this part of Florida. You thinking of settling down here, Mr. Shayne?"

"I've lived in Miami a long time," Shayne said.

"Now, now," Hat Raymond interrupted. "Ever since this young pup came down from Georgia, his

office has been after him for new accounts. Forget it." He turned to his granddaughter. "Mr. Shayne is staying for dinner, Effie."

Effie Bascom's smile didn't mask her sudden confusion. "Oh, that's nice."

"Fine, fine," Tod Bascom echoed. "Give Grandpa a change of venue."

"Yeah," chuckled the old man. "You love birds get mighty tiresome with your infernal billing and cooing."

He winked at Mike Shayne. The redhead smiled back but his brain was racing. The set-up was too simple. If the Bascoms wanted to kill an old man to garner an inheritance, why had they waited so long? If Raymond were telling the truth, he'd been at their mercy for weeks. In this deserted wilderness, anything could have been arranged. Suddenly, Shayne realized there was something Hat Raymond hadn't told him. It just didn't add up.

"I'll go see what we have in the fridge," Effie Bascom said.

Even as she left, tripping into the interior of the house, Shayne wondered about the bits of leaves and straw still clinging to the material of her pretty blue skirt.

III

THE AFTERNOON wore on. Mike Shayne made himself comfortable. Before he allowed Hat Raymond

to show him on a tour of the house, he asked to call his office. Raymond showed him into a den, and hobbled off with Tod Bascom into the living room. Surrounded by stuffed fish and framed photos harking back to early Florida days, Shayne got Lucy Hamilton on the phone.

"Hi, angel."

"What's up?" she asked. "Nothing important's happened while you've been gone. A quiet day for a change."

Shayne gave her the number of the Raymond house for emergency use and briefly outlined what he was up to. Lucy listened patiently.

"Do you think the old man knows what he's talking about?" Lucy asked when he had concluded.

"Maybe. Maybe not. Anyway, he's a likeable fellow so I'll stick around for dinner and see what happens. He may be dreaming things up but I think I can find that out soon enough. And Lucy—there's something I'd like to have you do for me!"

"Yes?"

"Call City Hall in Macon, Georgia and find out if they have a record of a marriage between Tod Bascom and Effie Raymond. That's B-A-S-C-O-M. Call me here as soon as you get the dope."

"Right, Michael—wait a minute. Effie can't be a proper name."

"I'm not worrying about her,

angel. I'm mostly interested in Tod Bascom."

Lucy Hamilton sighed and hung up.

Shayne went back to the living room. The old man and Tod Bascom were having a drink. A chrome decanter and glasses gleamed on an end table. Raymond waved Shayne to help himself, winking again.

"Help yourself, Mike. Twenty year old port. You look like a port man."

Tod Bascom chuckled. "Mr. Shayne looks like he can drink anything, Grandpa."

Shayne tilted his glass. "I consider that a compliment."

Hat Raymond swallowed his drink, his eyes glowing.

"In my day, a man wasn't a man unless he could down a gallon of cider without stopping. The Seminoles had a brand of firewater like to make your ears turn like spigots—" He rambled on, with gestures and eye-popping enthusiasm.

Shayne listened attentively, his eyes studying Tod Bascom. The man was a hard nut to crack. He seemed distant and aloof yet his face wore the right expression of interest though Shayne would have bet money that he wasn't listening too carefully either. A man to watch, Shayne told himself.

At the height of the old man's rambling, there was a crash of noise from the kitchen—a shatter-



ing of glass. Tod's face broke apart with concern and he started for the door. Effie came to the entranceway, looking chagrined. The entire front of her skirt was dripping with water.

"What the devil!" Hat Raymond swung his stiff leg and stood erect.

"Sorry," Effie said. "Stupid of me. Spilled a pitcher of ice water. I thought you might want something cool so I was making some lemonade for dinner. I'll have to run upstairs and change my dress. Mr. Shayne, woudl you excuse me? Tod, would you come up with me? I can never manage that zipper on the dress I want to change into."

"Quite all right," Shayne said.

The old man mumbled under his breath and watched his granddaughter and her husband go up the stairway to the next level.

"Women," Hat Raymond said. "Always mooning—always making mistakes."

"Could be," Shayne said, his eyes narrowing. "Now how about

you showing me around this place. Might see a few things before they come on down."

Hat Raymond slapped his good leg. "You're right, Shayne. Come on. I've got a few knick-kacks I'll bet you never saw the like of in Florida before. Been buying for many years some fine stuff from the dealers."

Before they walked off to the other rooms, Shayne could hear water roar somewhere overhead. Somebody was obviously taking a shower. Effie Bascom, probably, before she changed into a fresh outfit.

There was no doubt that it was also a fine way to make certain that nothing they might be talking about could be overheard. As modern as the ranch style house seemed to be, the cascade of the steaming water filled the rooms with muted thunder.

IV

HAT RAYMOND asked, in a cozy den room, "Well, Mike, what do you think?"

Shayne made knobs of his hands. "I'm not sure. We could wait around for days before they made a move, and they'd get suspicious if I stayed too long. I haven't got the time, either. But I have an idea. I'm going to try an experiment—with your help."

The old man's eyes glowed. "Such as?"

"I'm inclined to believe with you that your relatives are at the bottom of your troubles. But, frankly, they're just a couple of rank amateurs and if we want to flush them out into the open, there is only one way to do it. We'll play a little game, to force their hand. It's the best way I know to bring matters to a head quickly. And I'm sure it'll be all over by tomorrow. I don't want to risk your neck either."

Hat Raymond nodded. "Better right than sorry, Shayne. I want to make my mind clear about Tod. He's no good for Effie. What do we do?"

"Just this," Shayne said. "I'll start talking at dinner or sometime later and whatever I say, you follow my lead. Get that?"

"I think I get you. You're going to fake some kind of a real estate deal between the two of us to make them think they're losing out. Is that it?"

"Yes," Shayne said.

When Effie came into the den about fifteen minutes later, she found her grandfather and Mike Shayne engrossed in a survey of some Indian arrowheads.

"Gentlemen," she said pleasantly, "dinner is served."

Dinner consisted of turtle steak, boiled potatoes and a cream pie that was out of this world. Whatever else she might turn out to be, Effie Bascom was a superb cook. Shayne ate with relish. Hat Ray-

mond, in spite of his troubles, had a hearty appetite. For all his years, he ate like a waterfront longshoreman. Tod Bascom ate delicately.

Effie had slipped on a green frock for dinner. She looked pretty, prim and every inch the granddaughter of an old timer like Hat Raymond.

"Some food, eh, Shayne?" Hat Raymond chortled.

"A feast," the redhead agreed, keeping a close eye on the Bascoms. But nothing suspicious passed between them. Not by word or glance. Tod was politely listening to everything the old man said and deferring to Shayne in the conversation.

Effie smiled. "More pie, Mr. Shayne?"

"Please, no. I'm chock full of good food as it is, Effie." The redhead leaned back in his chair.

Hat Raymond looked pleased. "Effie's a fine housekeeper, Shayne."

Just after dessert, the phone rang in the living room. Prim Effie Bascom answered it, nodding. "It's for you, Mr. Shayne. It's a Miss Hamilton!"

He took the call and turned his back on the dinner table. "Hello, Lucy," he said. "Did that package arrive from my aunt?"

"Yes, Michael," Lucy said crisply. "Tod Bascom was married in Macon, Georgia, to a Miss Effrella Raymond."

"Fine, fine," Shayne said. "When did the package come?"

"Just one week ago to be exact. That help you, Michael?"

"Yes. Thanks. I'll pick it up when I get there. Say about ten o'clock tonight. You go on home, Lucy."

"Michael, you're sure everything is all right?"

"Yes, I'm sure." He hung up and returned to the table smiling.

"That's a relief," he said. "I've been trying to buy a special vase for my aunt. Miss Hamilton, my secretary, finally found the right piece. My aunt will be pleasantly surprised."

Effie smiled. "I like vases too. They're so graceful."

"You should," Shayne said off-handedly, tackling the dessert. "New bride like you."

"Not new as all that," she said. "It's been six months now."

"Yeah," Hat Raymond rumbled. "Six months since this rascal stole the apple of my eye. You should have seen Effie's mother, Shayne. She come late in my life but she was as pretty as they can come. A real lady, besides."

"Grandpa," Effie said softly, blushing.

Tod Bascom changed the subject. "I never did hear how you know Grandpa, Mr. Shayne."

The angular face of Michael Shayne crinkled into hard, granite lines.

"We have a similar interest in

property. Hat and I are financing a land deal of some importance. We're just about ready to consummate the deal."

Tod Bascom looked amazed. "You never mentioned that, Grandpa!"

Hat Raymond took Shayne's lead. "I don't have to tell everybody all my business, son."

Shayne said, "Yes, this is official. We're all set to go ahead with the project. We're working out of Miami with a corporation there. Your grandfather, my old friend Hat, is putting up five hundred thousand dollars for the deal."

"Oh," Tod Bascom's bloodless face was all the answer Shayne could have needed. "Well, you do go in for big surprises, Grandpa. Hear that, Effie? While we weren't looking, this old fox has been making busy plans."

"And why not?" Hat Raymond cried. "What for is money if not for building and creating things? Course, I haven't changed my mind about Effie. She'll get the bulk of it all when I'm gone."

"Hush," Effie said. "I'd rather not think of that."

"Forget it," Tod said. "Grandpa is healthier and heartier than nine out of ten men who walk into my office. He'll outlive us all."

"Amen to that," Shayne said, raising his glass for a toast. The bait had been cast on the waters and the fish were beginning to nib-

ble hungrily. The Bascoms both looked pale and unhappy.

Lucy Hamilton's information about the Bascom-Raymond nuptials had proved conclusively that Tod and Effie had come from Georgia a few months ago and pretended to be man and wife for the old man's benefit. Then when Tod had learned she was really the old man's heiress, he had finally married her. They had obviously skipped off for a few days last week to do it. That had to mean something.

Hat Raymond's life had to be in grave danger.

V

ALONG ABOUT eight-thirty, Mike Shayne rose to his feet and stretched luxuriously. Hat Raymond who had been dozing on the lounge blinked awake and looked surprised. Effie and Tod Bascom looked politely puzzled.

"Well, folks. Time I was getting back." Shayne smiled at Effie. "A marvelous dinner, Effie. I'll have to make it up to you sometime."

"Nonsense. It was a pleasure, Mr. Shayne."

"You really have to go?" Hat Raymond asked forlornly. "We really didn't get to talk much—about that deal, I mean."

"I know," Shayne admitted. "But all the contracts will be ready tomorrow morning. I'll pick them up at the lawyers first thing

and drive out here. You have the check ready for the full amount."

"All right," wheezed the old man. "Sounds good. I am tired at that and my head is still sore."

"You take care, partner." Shayne wrung the leathery old paw warmly. "I need you. Well, Tod. See you again tomorrow. Been nice meeting you."

All three of them saw him to the front door. The front light was on, a strong beam lighting the driveway. All about them, the surroundings lay dark and ominous. Far off, the concentrated glare of Lomar Point glittered like a jewel in the darkness.

Hat Raymond tried to read Shayne's eyes as he left but gave up, sighing, rubbing his hand on his bruised forehead. Effie said goodnight timidly and Tod Bascom waved a farewell.

Shayne pulled his coat collar tight against the night wind that was building and reached his car. He turned the key on, let the motor pulse into life and lit a cigarette. Finally, he stabbed the darkness with his headlights, picked up the shell drive and drove off. The road dipped and swallowed his car. Soon, the lights of Point Lomar were behind him. The gloom swallowed him before he could reach the highway.

He pulled off the road, cut the engine, then the lights and slipped out of the car. A long vigil lay ahead of him but it might well be



worth everything. By his clear calculations, he had forced the amateur hands of Effie and Tod Bascom. They weren't about to let a half million dollars fade away on some land appropriation if they really were responsible for the clumsy attempts on Hat Raymond's life.

Mike Shayne ran back through the dense shrubbery, heading for the ranchhouse. The front light

had long since been extinguished. The sky was shot with bright stars. He worked his way toward the house, deciding on approaching from the rear.

There was a sound of a television playing in the stillness. A rush of water as though Effie were washing dishes. Somebody coughed. It sounded like old Hat's phlegmy voice.

Of course, it could be hours before the Bascoms made their move. But of one thing the redhead was certain. That move would come tonight before Point Lomar saw another dawn. It had to, if the Bascoms were guilty.

He edged forward in the dark, skirting a hedge and squeezing past the last line of palm trees. An unbroken stretch of twenty yards led to the back of the house. A solitary light shone from the living room. The television sound seemed to come from there too. Shayne raced across the open ground and closed with the covering dark of the house's shadow.

He found the screen window Raymond had told him about, eased it open and clambered inside. Voices hummed nearby. He recalled the physical layout of the rooms. Kitchen just before him and to the right. Living room left. He crept forward stealthily, unholstering his .45. It felt comfortable in his hand.

"More brandy, Grandpa?"
"No thanks, honey. I'm fine."

"You sure your head is all right? That was a bad bump."

"Can't kill me." The old man's laugh was full-throated. "It was lucky that Shayne got here when he did."

"Grandpa." Effie Bascom sounded troubled. "Are you really going into this deal with Mr. Shayne?"

"Course, I am. It's a fine investment."

"I suppose you're right but it sounds so risky and that is an awful lot of money."

"Effie, I'm surprised at you." The oil in Tod Bascom's voice made Shayne grin in the darkness. "Grandpa knows what's good. I think it's a grand idea. Now stop bothering him and go to bed. I'll be up in a minute."

"All right, Tod. Goodnight, Grandpa."

"Night, honey. Don't you fret about your old Grandpa. He knows what he's doing."

The loudness of the voices guided Shayne forward. He heard the sudden patter of Effie's heels going upstairs. A brief silence followed in which he could hear liquid pouring from a bottle into a glass.

"Have another drink, Grandpa?"

"Sure, son. I feel like tying one on tonight."

Shayne reached the door and edged it open a fraction. A thin sliver of vision showed him Tod Bascom next to Hat Raymond

holding a glass in his hand. The clean set of the younger man's face was deceiving.

Hat Raymond was chuckling in his old man's way. "Damn fool."

"Who?" It was Tod, sounding surprised.

"That Mike Shayne. Thought he knew his stuff. So he comes, turns tail and runs." He fell to chuckling again.

"I~ don't understand you, Grandpa."

"Huh? Oh, never mind. Tell me, you and Effie happy?"

"What do you think? I love her. She loves me."

"That's good. That's why I put her in my will. I want her to have everything when I go."

Tod Bascom laughed nervously. "You'll live longer than anybody."

The old man chortled. "Don't think I won't. Had another check-up just Monday. Doc Bates says my pump is as good as a colt's. Hell, if a man's heart is sound, he can last forever."

"Yes," Bascom said quietly. "Have another drink."

"I will. Hey, Tod. You trying to get me drunk?"

"Now who could do that to an oldtimer like you?"

Shayne widened the slit in the door. Both men were barely three feet apart. Hat Raymond was filling his glass and Tod Bascom was glaring with hatred down at the old bent back.

"You could," Raymond chuckled, "if you put your mind to it. You don't fool me none, Tod. You'd like to see me dead so Effie could have all that money to herself. I've known about you a long time. I thought that Shayne could spot you but he didn't." The old man was performing beautifully as Shayne had instructed him.

"What are you talking about?" Tod Bascom looked incredulous.

"You damn well know. And I'm warning you now to stop it. Don't try to lay me out. It won't work. For your information, you're wasting your time. I made Effie my heir, sure. But she *isn't any more*. I changed the will again, when you two were gone for a few days. So if you kill me it will be for nothing. What do you think of that?"

"What?"

From where he stood, Shayne could see the blood rise in the younger man's face. Bascom mottled like magic. His hands clenched and he swallowed hoarsely. Before Hat Raymond or Shayne could divine his intention, he had rushed forward and smashed the old man's glass aside.

Hat Raymond lurched erect and swung a hard fist.

Bascom shoved him back against the divan and whipped out a cold looking, black .38. "You old buzzard," he screamed. "I'll kill you whether you're bluffing or not."

"Go ahead," cried Hat Raymond. "Shoot and you'll fry in the chair for nothing. I have *no* heir now I tell you! All the money is going into a cancer research organization right here in Florida."

Tod Bascom shook himself. "Smart, aren't you? Well, you'll change that will again—or else."

"Or else what?"

"Or else I'll make you wish you had. You don't think I married Effie because I loved her, did you? She was just a sleeping partner to me until I found out she was going to be an heiress. I know what she means to you—so you hear me out. I intend to kill her if you force me to."

"Why, you ornery—"

Mike Shayne didn't wait for Hat Raymond to do something rash. He swept the door back, burst into the room and leveled his .45 at Tod Bascom.

"Drop it, Tod."

Bascom cried out in fright, turned and brought his own gun up. Shayne's eyes went cold. There was no time to play it nice.

But he had not reckoned with the old man. Hat Raymond had carved a livelihood out of Florida when it was a swamp, had molded a career with his fists. With a whoop that sounded like a Seminole on the warpath, he swooped down on his granddaughter's husband in a flying tackle. The .38 flew out of Bascom's hand.

Hat Raymond lay there pant-

ing lustily, hugging Tod's knees. Bascom kicked him off viciously and tried to dodge around Shayne.

Without waste motion, Shayne brought up a left hook and jarred Bascom to his heels. A follow-up right hand crunched on the smooth jaw. Bascom fell heavily, sending a vase crashing.

"Shayne," Raymond moaned. "I was right. It was him!"

"You okay?" Shayne reached for him. "There's still Effie to consider."

"Effie? What's Effie got to do with it?"

Effie Raymond said quietly from the doorway, "Stand still all of you. Don't try anything foolish, Mr. Shayne. This shotgun will blast you to bits."

Hat Raymond cursed and stared at his granddaughter, unbelievingly.

She saw the look and her eyes blazed. "Yes, you old buzzard," she cried. "Me too. The granddaughter you forgot about for ten years and then tried to buy off with an inheritance. Well, it isn't enough. You broke Mother's heart. You killed her. And nothing's enough to make up for the misery until you're dead and we collect the money."

VI

MICHAEL SHAYNE bit his lip, and very carefully dropped his gun to the floor.

"Effie!" Raymond boomed. "Don't talk like that!"

She was tight-lipped, watching them intently from the landing. Shayne studied her. The shotgun was awesome, poking at them like that in her inexperienced, and obviously nervous hands.

"What do you think, Grandpa?" Effie said harshly. "I wanted Tod to marry me. I knew I was just another girl to him. Look at me. Who'd want me without money? I'm plain! Plain! You always told me I was homely. How many years did I hear that until Mother died? And then you forgot about me until this year. Your conscience began to bother you about Mother and me as you were nearing the end of your life. You wrote and told me about the will. I saw my chance."

Hat Raymond suddenly looked his age. He raised a protesting, gnarled hand. "Effie—don't! Your mother would—"

"To hell with you," she broke in. "Leave Mother out of it—it's too late now. So you changed your will again. Well, you'll change it right back. You'll change it right now or I'm going to blast you to pieces. Come on, you'll write that letter—"

Mike Shayne was watching Effie Bascom very carefully. He had seen the same thing so many times. A helpless, defenseless young girl, pushed to the extremes of stress and anger both,

suddenly pointing a gun with every intention of using the weapon. Effie was very dangerous right now.

"Effie," Shayne said quietly. "Use your head. You can't do it this way. You need a lawyer. You can't force it like this."

Her eyes swung to him madly. You knew all along, didn't you? Sitting here all afternoon, pretending. You knew! How did you know?"

Shayne shrugged. "I should have heard you drive up. I didn't. You had leaves clinging all over your clothes. I knew you had parked and come through the vegetation on foot. You, or more than likely, Tod slugged your grandfather, after pretending to have left for Tampa. I just happened along at the right time. You couldn't know that Hat had phoned me already. So you and Tod hid at a safe distance when I drove up and pretended to arrive a little later. It would have been easy. Hat could have died from a head blow and people might have believed he fell down accidentally. After all, he's over ninety."

She nodded, watching her husband groan awake. "And that call from your secretary?" Effie asked.

Shayne smiled. "I learned you and Tod were married last week. Which meant he married you only after he came down here with you and heard from Hat's lips personally about the will you were heir

to. He only married you for money, girl!"

"Damnation," Hat Raymond muttered. "I was right. My own kin—You were right, Shayne." He turned to Effie. "You're no flesh and blood of mine, acting like this."

Shayne restrained him with a headshake, turned to the distraught girl, and said, "Effie, put that shotgun down. Murder won't solve anything. Be sensible."

Hat Raymond shook his head. "Stubborn—just like her mother." But there was grudging admiration in his old eyes.

Tod Bascom was swaying to a standing position. Shayne gauged the distance. There wasn't going to be another chance.

"Effie," he said. "Listen to me."

She ignored him. "You all right, Tod?" Her eyes swung back to Shayne. "Well?"

"Listen to reason." Shayne spoke slowly. "Old Hat here would straighten out all this and make you his legal heir without fuss if you'll just—"

Tod Bascom suddenly came to life. "Effie," he blurted wildly. "Don't be crazy, honey. Don't shoot! Even if we try to say you were pushed into killing Grandpa, you'll lose all the money. I'll—we'll go to the chair. Shayne's a witness. For God's sakes, Effie, think of me!"

"Grandpa has to die," she said coldly. "Tonight! Think I'm going

to wait years while he takes his time to die and we live on crumbs? No! Now just get out of the way, Mr. Shayne and don't try anything. Tod, come over here—away from them. This is a shotgun, not a rifle."

And because it was a shotgun, Mike Shayne took the chance. He sprang forward, getting Tod Bascom's body between him and the muzzle. Effie tried to shout, but too late. Shayne pinned Bascom's hand and blocked his own body with Effie's husband.

Hat Raymond took a hand once more. He dove behind the divan, creaking joints and all, hollering like an Indian again. Effie swung the muzzle, left and right, then left again, sorely confused and bewildered—her eyes glazed. Shayne was watching her closely and suddenly shot Tod Bascom toward her as he would release a bowling ball.

Bascom screamed and tried to cover his face with his hands. Effie jumped and tried to sight past him. There was too much blur for her to focus properly, and suddenly Tod crashed into her.

They were both a helpless tangle on the stairs. Shayne vaulted the divan, scooping up his fallen .45 as he went, and blasted twice over their heads. Effie dropped the shotgun and averted her face. Tod Bascom collapsed helplessly. Effie Bascom's loud sobs filled the room.

"Damnation!" Hat Raymond cried. "Damn money! Bunch of vultures. Ruins everything. Even your own flesh and blood will kill you for money, Shayne."

"Shut up, for a change," Shayne said, not too unkindly. "If you didn't play with people's lives and dreams like an old fool, you wouldn't tempt people into doing stupid things. Tod Bascom is a weakling who saw a chance to make money the easy way and you played on his weaknesses with all this will business. Why didn't you tell me you had changed the will so I could know what the story was and do something about it? I had to find that out for myself."

Hat Raymond's eyes shone with admiration. He extended a leathery hand. "Shayne, I sure could have used a man like you forty years ago. What a time we would have had cleaning up things around here."

"What about your granddaughter?"

The old man subsided. "A man has to take what comes. It doesn't make me happy to know she wanted me dead. But she was temporarily out of her mind—almost insane. I'll tell you this, young feller, I didn't get to where I am crying over spilt milk."

"No," Shayne said. "I guess you didn't, at that."

Raymond smiled faintly. "At least, Effie's a fighter. There's a



lot to be said for fighters. Even when they fight in the wrong."

Mike Shayne just nodded, as he kept Tod and Effie covered. It was time to call the operator and ask for the local law to come down and make an arrest—two arrests.

But he hadn't reckoned on Hat Raymond. The old man fixed an eye on Tod Bascom and his badly frightened granddaughter and spoke to Shayne.

"No law, Shayne. Hat Raymond takes care of his own. I'm responsible for Effie losing her head. I know this much. This young husband of hers is no good for her. If he divorces her and forgets any claim he may have on her, I'll let him clear out of Florida right now—providing Effie stays with me and lets me make it up to her. I've got a lot of catching up to do."

In a moment, Effie had rushed to him, eyes streaming with tears, trembling with remorse. Hat Raymond folded her gently in his arms and glared at Tod Bascom.

"There's your answer, Bascom," he growled. "You leaving now or does Mike Shayne have to run you in?"

Tod Bascom gulped nervously, flung a look at Effie, at the determined Hat Raymond and nodded his acquiescence. "Would you wait for me, Mr. Shayne," he said, "while I go upstairs to pack my few things and drive me to the station." And he walked slowly up the stairs to his room.

Mike Shayne rubbed his earlobe speculatively. Hat Raymond may have lost a son-in-law—but

he seemed to have acquired a brand new granddaughter. Shayne fervently hoped so, for the old man's sake.

"Well, Shayne," Raymond said happily over Effie's shoulder. "I guess everything may work out just fine."

Mike Shayne shrugged. "Looks like it. But you're lucky they were just a couple of crazy, rank amateurs. Well, there's nothing left for me to do but drive back to Miami and have my secretary send you a bill for two thousand dollars.

"By the way, Hat," Shayne went on. "I just checked the shotgun. Not a damned thing in it. They were just a pair of amateurs to the end."



THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET—in the next issue

DEATH OF A DEAD MAN

The Miami Redhead Meets a New Kind of Adversary

by BRETT HALLIDAY

A Tale of Terror in the Evening in the City by

SHANE

STEPHENSON



A SMALL MATTER OF TIME

THEY WERE STILL somewhere in the room, he knew that even though they had stopped talking. He wasn't sure how many there were, he thought at least three.

Only two of them had spoken, never to him, always to each other. One had a lisp, especially on words like three. He gave this man the name three-she, pictured him

as tall, angular, with thin nervous movements and washed-out complexion. The other man spoke in ordinary tones, neither loud nor soft, no inflection, no dialect, nothing to give him away. He was no-face.

He tried to determine the man's height. Three-she garbled his final words as if he were bringing his

face down for someone shorter than he. Couple this with three-she's height and the other man must be quite a bit shorter. A mutt-and-jeff pair.

Another thing was his walk. No-face walked with a heavy foot. People who walk with heavy feet are usually short and squat. He remembered an uncle he had as a boy. Whenever the uncle would visit, he would know him by the walk. His uncle was just over five feet, and he weighed at least two hundred pounds.

He had liked his uncle, sometimes they would play games like tap-tap, hide and go seek, blind man's bluff. His uncle showed him how to Indian wrestle, used to tell him how strong he was getting. His uncle was a good man. Solid, short, squat. Like no-face.

There was someone else in the room. Little noises that didn't belong to the two who spoke, a kind of breathing from somewhere on the side when he imagined mutt-and-jeff to be elsewhere.

He listened for a sound, a gasp for air or any sound that a human makes, but all he could hear was the breathing, very faint, with a rhythm of its own. He wasn't even sure it was breathing, it was more like a humming noise. But very soft, very soothing.

He tried to think of other things. Time was very important, people always did everything on time. There was that old joke about the

world coming to an end when they ran out of time. It was silly in a way, people run out of time but not the world. Maybe he ran out of time, maybe he's dead. No, it couldn't be that, he was alive a little while ago.

He had been busily going about his affairs like any ambitious young lawyer. Praise for his court-room conduct had just come from a very important client, he knew that within five years he would be made a partner in the firm, and this before he was forty. It didn't make any sense to be dragged away from the world and shut up in a room with strange men.

If only he could see. They didn't have to put suction cups over his eyes. He had a feeling he wouldn't see anything even if he were not blindfolded by the cups, that the room was in total darkness. Not that he could take them off, with his hands and feet tied so tightly.

That's another thing they didn't have to do, he couldn't go anywhere. He didn't know where he was, didn't even know if it was a room at all. He couldn't be sure he wasn't in some kind of cave.

That didn't sound right to him, there was no smell of a cave or anything underground. He thought of the time he had played in caves as a boy. He remembered the musty smell, the dank atmosphere, the hard time breathing as he penetrated deeper and deeper.

This wasn't like that, this wasn't a cave or a tunnel so it must be a room in a house somewhere, a house in a deserted area, there were no noises from outside.

And he was in that house, bound, gagged, blindfolded, and in the company of three people, two of whom speak. Or do they? He tried to remember if they actually spoke or if he just imagined it.

He thought of the voices, of what they had said. Something about fences. That's right, three—she had said something about fences being repaired. No matter what some people do, fences had to be repaired all the time.

But what fences, and why do they always have to be repaired?

No-face agreed. He didn't think it was right that people should go through so much trouble for nothing, but if that didn't happen they'd be out of work. They had laughed when this was said, maybe it was some kind of joke between them.

He wondered if they said the same thing every time they had someone helpless. He had the idea they had done this before, that he wasn't the first.

That was foolish, this was some kind of joke being played on him and he would go along with it until he was free. There was nothing else he could do.

Three—she had said something about waiting for people to go home. If there are people around

it can't be too deserted. This made him feel better, he thought of people coming to see him and he wanted to laugh because they wouldn't be able to see anything, it would be like playing blind man's bluff again. Only this didn't seem like a game and he mustn't get silly, maybe they wouldn't like it if he got silly.

Never any mention of him, no notice that he was even there. Obviously they knew he was sitting there, they had brought him. Maybe. He wasn't sure, he wasn't sure of anything.

The last thing he remembered was working in his office on the Vito case. He had been out with a client for most of the day and had returned to the office after eight, there was so much to do.

He unlocked the office door, snapped on the lights and settled down to looking over the Vito file. A woman had killed her husband with a gun he had left lying around. The district attorney was pressing for first degree murder.

The woman had lovers, so the story went, and she wanted to be free of her husband. There was also a sizable insurance policy. That was the state's double motive but it was tenuous unless they could produce some of the alleged lovers; so far they had not been successful.

He knew the woman, he told them that when he asked to be removed from consideration as a de-

fense attorney. His law firm had refused, said that made it all the better. He didn't like it, didn't like it at all, but there was nothing he could do.

So he worked hard on it, hoping to convince a jury of accidental death. The gun discharged while she was examining it, she was not familiar with guns and had just picked it up for a look when it went off, hitting her husband in the forehead and killing him instantly. He had just returned from a weekend hunting trip and should never have left the rifle loaded and lying openly on the table.

It was in reality his fault, that's the way he was going to present it to the jury. He knew the state would claim that no man in his right mind would leave a loaded gun around like that, but he believed he had a good chance of selling the idea to the jury.

Especially if no lovers came forward. He doubted that any would.

He prepared his defense and told the woman exactly what she was to say. He was going to put her on the stand, she would make a good impression. He told her that if nothing went wrong she would soon be free. That's why he was in the office at night, to check over everything, make sure nothing could go wrong. It was very important that he get her off, he had to get her free for both their sakes. Everything depended on it.

He was returning the folder to

the file room, that's the last thing he recalled. Now he was sitting in the dark. For a second he thought he was still in the file room but he knew that couldn't be. He was too familiar with his office, he would be able to recognize it even in the dark. This was somewhere he had never been before, and he must have been brought by mutt-and-jeff.

They probably were waiting for him in the file room and knocked him unconscious as he went in. That's the way it had to happen but he couldn't figure out why, if they were going to harm him they could easily have done so without making him helpless.

This thought struck him suddenly and he was surprised that he wasn't afraid. He supposed it was because he could not accept the idea that anyone wanted him dead, that was ridiculous. The more he thought about it, the more inexplicable it seemed. Only one thing was clear, he couldn't stay like this much longer.

He caught the movement almost before it happened. Something was coming close to him, moving cautiously, stealthily, coming closer. His hairs bristled as he awaited whatever it was, he wanted to cry because he was so helpless.

He felt something tug at his hands and in a few seconds the tape that had bound his hands was off. As he worked his stiff fingers, slowly, stubbornly, he felt the tape

being removed from his feet. He was tired, physically, mentally, he didn't know what was happening but he was sick. He winced painfully as the suction cups were pulled from his eyes and the gag removed from his mouth.

Everything hurt, every bone in his body ached, every muscle felt torn and bruised and his eyes filled with tears from the pain. His throat was on fire and someone was going to have to pay dearly for this and then he stepped into the pit and it seemed to be deeper and deeper the more he fell. And then he got the idea that it was moving with him and this upset him because he could not keep up with it . . .

THE LOCAL NEWS in the afternoon paper was mostly routine. Probably the most dramatic item was a boxed column on page two. For the vast majority of the city's populace the death of Matthew Fleming meant nothing. To his colleagues and acquaintances it brought, in varying degrees, shock, grief, consternation and joy. To a young widow, who heard of his death some hours later in her cell, it brought a sudden collapse that required immediate hospitalization.

For those who read the account with any degree of interest, the details were brief and, as is customary, quite coldly put down.

"Matthew Fleming, an associate of Bleeker, Stone and Merriman,



local law firm, returned to his office in the Simpson Building last evening, ostensibly for some last minute work on the Vito trial which had been scheduled to begin the day after tomorrow before Judge Peter Cushman. Sometime later he apparently took the self-service elevator to the top floor of the nineteen story building, then climbed a metal ladder and crossed a false ceiling catwalk to get to the elevator machinery room located in a small windowless alcove directly underneath the main roof.

"This room houses the complete mechanism for the building's four elevators, as well as the electric pulse system for the famed flashing beacon light atop the Simpson tower. Evidence indicates that he remained in the room for some appreciable time before casting himself into one of the open elevator shafts. As is the nightly practice, all elevators remain on ground level until called into service."

"The body was found at 7:40 A.M. Exact time of death is uncertain although it is known to have occurred after 11:00 P.M. since all building personnel leave for home at that hour.

"No note was found on the body or in the room. Police could establish no immediate reason for the suicide, but it was pointed out that the deceased had recently been consulting a psychiatrist.

"Mr. Fleming was unmarried."

THE DAY AFTER the suicide of Matthew Fleming two men stood in the bedroom of a modest cabin on the outskirts of the city. It was still early afternoon but gray somber clouds hung overhead. Both table lamps in the room were turned on.

The taller of the two men was in his forties, heavyset, balding, accustomed to responsibility and not much given to idle talk, his name was George. His companion was of an indeterminate age, very short, thin, almost frail. He had a nervous

disposition, fingers always moving, eyes constantly blinking. He spoke with a lisp.

Someone walked into the bedroom, behind him the bathroom flushing sent a shudder through the cabin. The man slowly withdrew some bills from his wallet. He gave these to the heavyset man, who accepted the money with a gracious ease, as though it were something he had done many times before.

He expertly counted the money, then folded it once and inserted it in a small leather pouch which he carefully placed in his topcoat pocket. He buttoned the coat, adjusted his hat in the dresser mirror, and walked out of the cabin onto the three-step porch.

His companion followed. With a last nervous gesture he looked back into the room at the one remaining occupant before he slammed the door shut. He stepped over a child's roller skate as he hurried down the steps to the car, where George was already gunning the motor.

Several minutes later the third man came out of room 49 of the Highcrest Motel, absently kicked aside a skate that someone had carelessly left on the porch, and walked over to his automobile. He was highly pleased with himself. His brother's death had been avenged, or at least partially avenged.

He fingered the folded slip of pa-

per that was in his overcoat pocket. It had two names on it, given to him by his brother on a hunting trip the day before he was murdered. He knew the names by heart, knew that both had been lovers of his brother's wife. It didn't matter which one of them had done the actual killing—that the woman hadn't done it herself was clear in his mind, he knew she didn't have the nerve.

It was one of the two men but he didn't care which one, they were both equally guilty in his eyes. One down, one to go. It was as simple as that. If his sister-in-law were Sicilian, she would understand that a man needs to be avenged.

He stepped into his Buick and turned the engine over. He let it

idle for a few minutes, thinking of the woman. He would let her live, let her think about what she did. Whatever happened to her didn't matter to him, he had never liked her. She was not of their country, not of their blood. He shrugged. The only thing of importance was the piece of paper.

He took it carefully from his pocket and read the names for the thousandth time. Everything was arranged. Now it was just a small matter of time.

As he eased the big automobile down the sloping driveway, Joe Vito knew that very soon somewhere in the city a man would open his door and come face to face with death. He smiled.

There was nothing more anyone could do.

MIKE SHAYNE Presents

Next Month's Headliners

DEATH OF A DEAD MAN by BRETT HALLIDAY

The New Mike Shayne Novelet

THE FRIGHTENED SKY GIRL by ROBERT BARBOUR JOHNSON

A New Bull Costello Novelet

THE CUSTOMER'S ALWAYS RIGHT by CORNELL WOOLRICH

An Unusual Short Story

PARTNERS OF THE DARK



A Startlingly Timely Suspense Novelet

by ALSON J. SMITH

"The Block" was famous up and down the east coast—you could get a girl, a beer, dirty pictures, a heroin fix. If you were a Cop, you could even get underworld informants.

THE PHONE RANG in the office of Captain Mike Casey of the Criminal Investigation Detail, Baltimore Police Department. The Detail had been set up a year earlier to answer newspaper criticism that the Department was soft on crime syndicate hoodlums. The smartest, toughest cops in town had been pulled into it and Captain Mike Casey, 57, a grizzled, hard-boiled ex-pavement pounder had been called downtown from the North Avenue Station to head it up.

Casey picked up the phone. "Yeah?" he barked. Then, "Oh, hello, Commissioner," in a more subdued tone.

For a full three minutes he listened, participating in the conversation only to the extent of a guarded "yes" or "no" now and then. Finally he sighed and said: "Well, we'll do our best, Commissioner."

As he hung up, Casey said, "Damn!" to nobody in particular.

He paced the floor for a few minutes, rubbing his chin with his big paw, looking broodingly out at the traffic on Fayette Street. Finally he buzzed his secretary on the intercom. "Alice," he said, "tell Phil Egan to step in, will you?"

A few seconds later Lieutenant Phil Egan stuck his head in the

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door. He grinned. "Hi, Mike. What's the good word?"

"Come in and close the door," rumbled Casey. "And the word isn't good. It just came down from the Commissioner, and it couldn't be worse!"

Phil Egan was a thirty-nine year-old career cop who had graduated from the University of Maryland with an A.B. in Social Science. He had spent a year studying criminal law at Georgetown Law School and was considered a comer in the Department. He stood 5-11, weighed 180, and was a black belt man in judo. He had a square, high-cheekboned, tanned face with clear light blue eyes. His black hair was beginning to gray at the temples. He had been brought into the C.I.D. from the Detective Division because he was considered smart, tough, and resourceful.

Egan lit a cigarette. "Don't tell me they want us to bring in Johnny Unitas and Weeb Eubank just because the Colts blew one to the Steelers Sunday."

Casey snorted. "It's no joke, Phil. Its those goddam jewelry heists. The Commissioner has decided they're syndicate jobs; so he's taking them away from Burglary and dropping them in our laps."

Egan whistled. "That is the dirty end of the stick. How come?"

"He figures that nine successful heists in as many months means

syndicate. Either that or the heisters are old pro's who are cutting The Mob in for a big percentage. Major league thieves couldn't work here for nine months without syndicate okay."

Egan took a long drag on his cigarette. "That's for sure. Nine heists? I thought it was eight."

Mike Casey picked up a piece of paper from his desk. "Nine. Forty minutes ago a New York jewelry salesman by the name of Norman Feldman was slugged while getting his sample case out of the trunk of his car in front of the Hearn Jewelry Store on West Saratoga Street. The case had fifteen thousand dollars worth of ice in it. Feldman is in Johns Hopkins Hospital with a concussion."

"Any clues?"

Casey shook his head. "Nobody in the store or on the street saw it, or at least we haven't located anybody yet who will admit he saw it, and the guy is still unconscious."

"Sure puts us on the spot. I'll bet Burglary is throwing a party over losing this one."

Casey dead-panned: "The Commissioner put me on the spot, so I'm putting you on it. These jewelry heists are all yours, Phil. Good hunting."

II

BACK IN HIS OWN office, the first thing Phil Egan did was to stick pins in a map of the city—one red

pin for each of the nine jewelry robberies. None of them, he noted with interest, had been in the downtown Howard Street area. All had taken place in neighborhood shopping districts around the city. The pins formed an irregular circle the center of which was, roughly, the area around North Charles and Mount Royal, near the Pennsylvania Railroad Station.

As for the M.O., the last heist—the slugging of the jewelry salesman—was the only one involving violence. In all of the others, entrance—to seven jewelry stores and one hotel room—had been gained by simply unlocking doors, walking in at two or three A.M., and either opening safes by clever manipulation of the tumblers or cutting out the locks with a blow-torch and acetylene gas. Two of the former, five of the latter.

In the hotel room job, the thieves had let themselves into the room of a Broadway and Hollywood starlet who was playing a tryout week in Baltimore and had made off with \$20,000 worth of gems with which she had been gifted—as she was able to prove—by various gentlemen.

Whatever else they were, one of the gang had to be an expert locksmith, and another a first rate boxman. And, Phil Egan would bet his last shamrock, they were holed up in the slightly run-down, semi-bohemian area around North

Charles and Mount Royal. There were plenty of third rate hotels there—and a couple of good ones —plus rooming houses, bars, jazz joints. And there were several coffee houses where folk singers twanged guitars or bearded poets read their latest effusions to short-haired girls in toreador pants and dark glasses.

His first stop, obviously, was the Johns Hopkins Hospital. He phoned. Yes, Mr. Feldman had regained consciousness. Could he talk? Yes, but only for a minute or so.

It was late October, warm, hazy Indian summer, and Egan left his topcoat in the office. Hell of a day to be tracking down jewel thieves in town. He'd much rather be picking up Muriel after she got out of work at three and driving out towards Westminster to look at the foliage. He thought gloomily: that old line from Gilbert and Sullivan is right. A policeman's lot is not a happy one.

He picked up the unmarked black Chevrolet sedan that he usually used from the police garage on Gay Street and headed north for the Johns Hopkins Hospital. Well, he thought philosophically, he would see Muriel that night, and damn the foliage. They'd make their own colors in their own fashion.

A policeman was seated outman's room. He recognized Egan and said: "Hello, Lieutenant. Our

boy is awake, but he's got a flying saucer for a head."

Egan laughed shortly and went on in. A middle-aged nurse was sitting beside the bed, reading a magazine. The jewelry salesman's head was swathed in bandages. He had his eyes closed and the whiteness of his palor emphasized the dark lines of his eyebrows. He was a rather thin man of about thirty-five, and his horn-rimmed glasses with one cracked lense were on the bedside table.

"Lieutenant Egan, Police Department," he told the nurse crisply. Feldman heard him and slowly opened his eyes, which were brown and bloodshot.

"Sorry about this, Mr. Feldman. Feel like talking?"

The man smiled wanly and shook his head.

"Well, I understand," Egan said soothingly. "Just a couple of routine questions for now. Did you see the men who sapped you?"

Feldman whispered: "Not very well. Happened too fast. One was kind of fat."

"How many were there?"

"Three or four—I'm not sure."

"Did they have a car?" Phil Egan asked.

"Yes, it was parked right behind me."

"What make?"

"I think a Plymouth, about a fifty-six."

"What color?"

"Black."

"Did you notice the license number?"

Feldman shook his head. "Maryland plates," he whispered. He closed his eyes wearily.

The nurse looked reprovingly at Egan. He said: "Well, that's all for now. Thanks, Mr. Feldman."

The man didn't open his eyes.

A week later Feldman was out of the hospital and able to look through the mug books at Headquarters. He had seen his assailants briefly, but not well enough to make positive identification. The fat man he thought he might be able to identify.

He picked out four photos that might possibly be those of the men who had slugged him, including that of a fat-faced, heavy-set local thug named George "Binky" Byers, 28, who had fallen several times for petty larceny and simple assault. A very unlikely jewel thief, but Phil Egan sent Detective Sergeant Gus Anderson out to pick him up for questioning.

Byers last known address was a rooming house on Franklin Street. Anderson came back without him. He wasn't there, had left no forwarding address, and nobody in that transient neighborhood knew where he had gone. He hadn't been seen around the bars in over a year.

A few days later Egan, getting nowhere in his investigation of the jewelry heists, had dinner with Muriel Evans, in her three-room

apartment on Mount Vernon Place. Muriel was Goucher '54, which made her about twenty-nine. She was a blue-eyed, honey-haired blonde, about 5-6 in height, and with other and even more impressive statistics.

She was Travel Editor of the *Baltimore Sun*, and she had marriage in the back—and sometimes in the front—of her mind. She'd been Phil's girl for three years, ever since they'd met at a posh party thrown by another Goucher girl whom Egan had known ever since his Georgetown Law School days.

Muriel was something to look at, in a clinging blue housecoat and not much else. "How's my favorite cop?" she murmured, pressing against him and turning her face up for his kiss. It lasted a long time.

"Yum," he said finally, still holding her in his arms. "What's cooking?"

"Me," she said. "Also shrimp chop suey with water chestnuts, imported all the way from Doo Far's carry-out around the corner on Charles Street."

"Sounds great," he said, letting her go.

She pointed to a tea tray with bottles, a jar of olives, a bucket of ice cubes, and cocktail glasses on it. "Be a good little Hawkshaw and mix us some martinis while I check the food," she called out as she went into the tiny kitchen.



It was a cozy apartment. Wall-to-wall deep green carpeting, three Van Gogh reproductions on the walls, glass-topped coffee table in front of the fireplace, shiny black log scuttle, low bookcases, a handsome combination television, FM radio, and hi-fi, a record-holder, his picture and one of her mother and father on the mantle. The furniture was gray, chic, comfortable. He mixed the martinis, slumped into an easy chair, and turned on the television to catch the six o'clock news.

The news was tiresome. Khru-

shchev might come to the UN. Cuba was complaining about U.S. violation of her air space around Guantanamo. There was a new revolution in Costa Rica. Richard Burton had been seen with his wife in Switzerland. The Colts were in good condition for their game with the Packers at Green Bay Sunday. And the police were still baffled by the series of sensational jewel robberies that had netted the thieves a quarter of a million dollars.

He grimaced at that and turned off the set.

Muriel came back into the living room. "Be a few minutes yet," she said. She sipped her martini, sitting on the floor in front of him, putting one hand comfortingly—if a bit excitingly—on his knee. He ran his fingers through her honey-colored hair.

"How are you doing with your jewel robbers?" she asked.

"Not so good," he replied glumly. "They're ruining my disposition. Also my love life."

She looked at him. "I think that involves me. Please elucidate, Charlie Chan."

He drained his martini and held out the olive to her. "I can't stay long after we eat. Got to check The Block on this damned jewelry thing."

She pouted. "Can't it wait? I thought we'd eat, catch the new Italian movie at the Art, and then come back here for an orgy."

Egan shook his head. "Can't wait, even though I could use a good orgy. But give me a rain check."

She sighed. "Sure. All I do these days is hand out rainchecks. If this keeps up I'll take out after those jewelry heisters myself."

He laughed shortly. "You're a cinch to do better than we're doing."

III

"THE BLOCK," as it was known all up and down the east coast, was really three blocks on East Baltimore Street, and it was a garish tenderloin replete with bars, B-girls, burlesque shows, night clubs, tattoo parlors, third-rate hotels, all-night movies, and gospel missions. You could get anything there—a girl, dirty pictures, a beer, a crabcake, a broken head, a heroin fix. It was the last of its kind—an organized-to-the-hilt, syndicate-controlled, Barbary Coast.

But its raffish people—stripers, bartenders, doormen, tattoo artists, men's room attendants, masters of ceremony, bookies, B-girls, bouncers—knew everything that went on in the underworld. They were privy to all the action in town. The Baltimore Police Department leaned heavily on its "informants" in The Block.

The unmarked black Chevvie sedan prowled slowly east on Bal-

timore Street towards this tawdry playground. Phil Egan, full of chop suey, slumped behind the wheel, wishing to hell he was back at Muriel's apartment, with Muriel in his arms, listening to *Judy Garland at Carnegie Hall* on the hi-fi.

He parked the Chevvie in front of Siggy's Bar on Commerce Street, just off The Block. Siggy's was near the Gayety Burlesque stagedoor, and, although it advertised itself as a stag bar, strippers from the theatre hung out there along with musicians, stagehands, and comedians.

The show was on in the Gayety so there was only one customer in the bar. The bartender was a fairly attractive girl of about twenty-seven who sat moodily smoking a cigarette behind the polished mahogany. The lone customer was studying the autographed photos of the strippers above the bar mirror.

The bar-doll—that's what they call lady bartenders in Baltimore—looked up. "Egan," she said. "What you-all doin' down heah tonight?" She had all of the Blue Ridge Mountains in her voice. She was one of his people.

"Hello, Marge," he said. "How's business?"

She flicked the ashes from her cigarette. "Reckon it'll pick up when the show breaks. At least, it usually does."

In a low voice Egan said: "You

get anything on that last jewelry heist?"

"The one abaht a week ago? Wheah that salesman got hisself slugged?"

He nodded.

"Uh-uh."

He took four photos from his pocket and a ten dollar bill from his wallet and held them out to the girl. "You make any of these?"

She studied the four mug shots that the salesman had picked out as possibles. "Naw," she said finally. "Ah kain't make a one of 'em." She looked wistfully at the bill folded between his fingers.

He sighed and put the pictures back in his pocket and the bill in his wallet. "Get anything, call me quick."

"Ah'll do that, Egan."

That was the way it went, all night. The people hadn't gotten a single rumble on the jewelry heists. Snaps O'Toole, who sold girlie magazines and dirty pictures, Loretta, the plump B-girl at the Tampico Club, Ferdy, the bookie at the newsstand on the corner of East Baltimore and Gay streets, Big Joe, the bouncer at the Troc Sho-Bar—all looked longingly at the ten-spot and regretfully admitted that they hadn't gotten a thing on the jewelry capers and couldn't make a mother's son of the mug shots.

It was one A.M. and the last shows were going on in all The Block clubs. He decided to try one

more informant—Charmaine, a stripper at the Three O'Clock Club. Her real name was Haydee Melendez and she was a Cuban refugee.

Egan really liked Haydee, who supported her mother and three younger sisters by taking off her clothes for a bunch of drunks twice a night, wheedling drinks for a percentage, acting as a police stoolie, and doing whatever else was necessary to pay the rent for three buggy tenement rooms on Paca Street and a few groceries from the supermarket.

The Three O'Clock Club was the usual Baltimore show spot. There was a horseshoe-shaped bar enclosing a stage and runway, and a five-piece band played behind a curtain at the open end of the horseshoe.

There were maybe fifteen men scattered about the bar, most of them carefully nursing a single bottle of beer. Three bartenders, a girl and two men, slouched with their backs to the stage, indifferent to the feigned ecstasies of the undulating peelers.

Phil Egan found a place at the bar. He didn't see Haydee anywhere. He said to the girl bartender: "Bourbon and water. Charmaine working tonight?"

"Yeah," the bar-doll said languidly. "She's back stage gettin' dressed. She's on next."

The girl who was working bumped a final sinuous bump,



pulled the pasties from her breasts and threw them to the beer-drinkers, yanked down her transparent panties to give the crowd a completely untrammeled look at her curvaceous posterior, and exited to scattered applause.

Then Charmaine came on. She was twenty, black-haired, brown-eyed, full-figured, with a coffee-

and-cream complexion. She worked strong—she had to; the strong workers were always in demand, and she couldn't afford long layoffs. In no time at all she was out of her sequin-studded silver dress, and working in a blue strobolite to bring out the full effect of the man's hands outlined in orange on her buttocks.

She saw Phil Egan and nodded in recognition, but otherwise ignored him as she stripped her brassiere and panties and writhed on the stage in simulated passion. She got a big hand from the beer-drinkers.

She came from backstage wearing the same sequin-studded silver dress she had worn at the beginning of her act. "'Allo Eegan," she said, smiling a gold-toothed smile. "Ow you like me tonight?"

"You're hotter than three feet inside a furnace," he said, taking her light brown hand in his. Then in a lower voice: "Let's talk for a minute."

She nodded and led him to an unoccupied table between the bar and the wall. One of the bartenders hustled over and he ordered another bourbon and water. She shook her head at the bartender, meaning she didn't want a drink and this guy wasn't a mark to be taken.

She took his hand in both of hers. "So, Eegan, wot I do for you?"

"Take a look. Any of 'em ring a

bell?" He handed her the four photos, and made sure she saw the folded ten between his fingers.

She looked carefully at the pictures. Three of them she turned down with a shake of the head, but the fourth she studied intently. Then she smiled and deftly plucked the bill from between his fingers.

"Thass heem," she said. "Thass Pete."

"Pete who?"

"Pete I don't know who. Zey jus' call heem Pete."

"Who's 'they'?"

"Hees buddies. Two of zem. Zey come here many time for oh, 'bout eight months."

"Catch any other names?"

"Lemee theenk. Wan zey call Frank. Zat all I hear."

"Are they heeled?"

She nodded. "Oh, good! Zey buy wheesky, teep big. Five dollah, wan time I treenk wiz zem."

"What did they talk about?"

She shrugged. "Ball game, horses—I don't remember."

"Anything about jewelry?"

Her eyes opened wide. "Joolry? No, I don't heenk—"

"Haydee, the next time they come in, try to get their names and addresses. It'll be worth fifty."

"Feefty dollah? Oh, I try hard, Eegan!"

"So long, Haydee. You're a good kid." He kissed her lightly on the cheek.

She giggled and said: "Not like

zat, Egan. Like zis." She kissed him on the lips, her full mouth working sensuously against his.

"Very nice," he said. "Thanks, Haydee. And don't forget those names and addresses.

Well, it wasn't much to show for a night's work, but it was something. Binky Byers, the fat hoodlum tentatively identified by Feldman as one of his assailants, was still in town, was hanging around The Block with two pals, and was calling himself Pete.

Wearily he headed the black Chevvie towards his apartment on Calvert Street.

IV

TWO NIGHTS LATER Egan had dinner at Muriel's. Afterwards they made a fire, threw some pillows on the floor in front of the fireplace, and lay there, sipping brandy and listening to the hi-fi. It was cozy and warm, and so was Muriel, but at 11:25, just as their kisses were beginning to take on a new meaning, the phone rang.

"Let it ring," he groaned.

"Damn! I'd like to." But she got up and answered it. Then she held it out to him. "It's for you."

It couldn't be anybody but Mike Casey, because nobody but Mike knew that he could be reached at this number.

Casey rasped: "Phil? They've dropped an atom bomb on us. Just blew the safe in the Lord Calvert

Hotel Jewel and Fur Shop and grabbed one hundred eighty thousand dollars worth of ice. Didn't touch the furs. Get down here right away."

The black Chevvie streaked downtown to the Lord Calvert Hotel in six minutes.

The Jewel and Fur Shop was on the mezzanine floor of the big hotel, overlooking the ornate lobby, but set well back from it. There were several other shops, a travel bureau, and the hotel's business offices there, and after the close of the business day the mezzanine was usually quite deserted. It was reached either by elevator or by a broad staircase from the lobby.

Phil Egan bounded up the stairs. There were two policemen outside the Jewel and Fur Shop. Inside were Mike Casey and two detectives, the manger of the hotel, and a Mr. Birnbaum, who managed the shop. There were wisps of acrid blue smoke still floating around, and the sharp odor of acetylene gas. The door of the safe was open, and there was a round hole about a foot in diameter where the lock had been.

"Hello, Mike," Egan said. "How'd they get in?" He added in an aside: "As if I didn't know."

"Like always," grated Casey. "They unlocked the door with a key and walked in."

"Anybody see them?"

"Maintenance man in the basement saw three guys in overalls go

up in the self-service freight elevator about quarter of eleven. One of them was carrying a big canvas bag, like a laundry bag. They must have got off at the mezzanine, opened the door with a key, cut the lock out of the safe with the acetylene, grabbed the ice, and left the same way they came."

"Anybody see them go out?" Egan asked.

"No. At least, we haven't turned up anybody yet."

"Hm. In that canvas bag they must have had one of those baby tanks of acetylene—the kind you carry in your arms—and a blow-torch. They knew when the night-watchman rang in from the mezzanine and timed it just right. They opened the door with a key, cut the lock out of the safe with the acetylene, grabbed the ice, shoved it into the bag with the acetylene tank, and left the same way they came, by the freight elevator."

"Yeah," said Casey. "And acetylene gas, which brings a heat of sixty-three hundred degrees Fahrenheit to the point of contact, can cut through steel like a sharp knife through a tender steak—as every damned crook knows."

One of the detectives came over to them. "This might be something." He handed Phil Egan a small metal gauge. "We found it under a chair."

Egan examined it curiously and stuck it in his topcoat pocket. "Anything else?"

"That's all," said the detective.

Egan spent the next day interrogating employees of the hotel and the Jewel and Fur Shop. There were two of the latter, a woman in her fifties and a man in his sixties. Both had been with the shop for more than ten years, both were bonded, both had airtight alibis, as did Birnbaum himself. Their keys, they swore, had not left their possession.

Egan had been hoping for some evidence of an inside job, but there was none. How the hell were they getting the *keys*? The police lab could uncover no trace of wax around the lock on the shop's door. No identifiable fingerprints, either—outside of those of Birnbaum and the two employees.

The interrogation of the hotel employees turned up only one interesting item—the maintenance man who had seen the three thieves get in the freight elevator made a fairly positive identification of a mug shot of Binky Byers as one of the three.

Binky, who was currently throwing money around The Block, was now tentatively linked to the last two jewelry heists.

Three nights later Phil Egan prowled The Block again. Most of the people hadn't heard anything, but when he came into the Three O'Clock Club Haydee Melendez left the man she was drinking with at the bar and nodded towards a table in a dark corner.

"'Allo Eegan," she said. "Zat Peet—he's here last night wiz same two pals. Me, two uzzer girls, we treenk wiz zem. Zey ask us come up zair place for party after club close. I zay 'Who the hell are you an' ware you place?' Zey zay: 'You'll come up?' We zay sure, we like party *mucho*. Zo Pete, he write down names and ware place is. I got paper in dressing room. Wait, I get." She bounced up.

Phil Egan sighed and ordered a bourbon and water. His hands were a little shaky. The unsolved jewelry heists were getting on his nerves, what with the newspapers demanding a shakeup in the Police Department and Mike Casey breathing hotly down his back. And now maybe the first small crack in the case was beginning to open up.

Haydee came back and handed him a piece of paper. On it in pencil was scrawled: Pete Byers, Maury Mahaffey, Frank Visconti—674 Preston Street, Apartment 3B.

Egan smiled and said: "Good girl, Haydee. Have a drink—a real one?"

"No, I got go back to heem." She nodded in the direction of the man at the bar. "Ware my fefty dol-lah, Eegan?"

He handed her two twenties and a ten. "How was the party?" he asked.

She laughed. "You don' theenk we go, do you? Bye, Eegan."

V

THE FIRST THING the next morning he called Sergeant Ed Stearns in Identification. "Ed? Phil Egan. Listen, have you got anything on a Maury Mahaffey or a Frank Visconti?" He spelled out the names.

Ten minutes later Ed Stearns called him back. "Phil? We've got both your boys. Want to hear it?"

"Shoot!"

"Mahaffey, Maurice—he is also known as Milton Haffey—thirty-two years old, unmarried, WMA. Last known address, twenty three fourteen West Saratoga Street. Three arrests suspicion of narcotics violation, one conviction. Served two years City Prison. Two arrests simple assault, one conviction. Served six months City Prison. Four arrests petty larceny, no convictions.

"Here's the other one: Visconti, Frank—also known as Larry Visco—thirty-four years old, WMA, divorced, last known address, fifty seven seventy one York Road. Three arrests petty larceny, one conviction. Served six months of a nine-month sentence to City Prison. One arrest on suspicion of rape, released after questioning. One arrest on charge of burglary, reduced to malicious mischief. Suspended sentence. Suspect in murder of gambler Jack Keefe, June sixteen, nineteen-fifty nine. Released after inconclusive lie detector test. That's it, Phil."

"Thanks, Ed. Send up the mugs, will you?"

"Sure thing, Phil."

Cheap, petty hoods. Where was the brains? Where was the clever locksmith? Where was the expert boxman?

The slugged salesman had gone back home by this time. Egan sent Sergeant Lou Grissom up to New York with the mug shots of Mahaffey and Visconti to see if Norman Feldman could identify them, along with Byers, as his assailants. He also put a stake-out on 674 Preston Street.

That night he was back prowling The Block, and this time he got a little something from the stoolies. The jewelry heisters were local, and the Outfit was letting them work for a big 40% of the take. The jewels were being fenced through a chain of small loan companies controlled by the Outfit. And the gang was already poised for another strike.

He ended up with Haydee in the Three O'Clock Club. No, she hadn't seen Pete, Frank, and Maury since the night they had invited her up to Preston Street for a party.

"What did they talk about that night?"

She wrinkled her brows in concentration. "Let me theenk. Mostly, zey complain zey don' have no fun. Life eez all work. Zat why zey want beeg wild party. Get trunk, have girls all night. I theenk it was Frank zay 'I don' even go movie



zince zat beeg Towson job."

Egan took a deep breath. "Thanks, Haydee. You're a big help."

By noon the next day Sergeant Grissom was back from New York. Feldman couldn't be absolutely sure, but he was fairly certain that Mahaffey and Visconti, along with Byers, were the men who had jumped him in front of Hearn's Jewelry Store.

Phil Egan mulled over in his mind what Haydee had said. Visconti had complained that he hadn't even been to a movie since the Towson job. What Towson job? Legit, a heist, or what?

Towson was a small, pleasant

suburban city ten miles north of Baltimore. He called the Towson Police Department and recognized the answering voice of Herman Watters.

"Hello," he said. "Herm, this is Phil Egan downtown. I want to check with you on three guys. Here they are: Byers, George, also known as Binky, and lately calling himself Pete; Mahaffey, Maurice, sometimes known as Milton Haffey; and Visconti, Frank, sometimes known as Larry Visco."

"Got 'em, Phil. I'll call you back."

Fifteen minutes later the Towson officer called back. "Phil? We have a small make on one of your boys. On the night of October twenty-ninth last, the Texaco station at York Road and Taylor Avenue out here was held up. We found an abandoned car at the scene later, a fifty-nine Plymouth sedan, black. Had Maryland plates, and we traced the registration to a George Peter Byers, six seventy four Preston Street, Baltimore."

Egan sighed. "Binky Byers. He likes his middle name now. Calls himself Pete. He seems to get around. What did you do with him?"

"We brought him in on suspicion. He claimed his car had been stolen the day before the hold-up but he hadn't reported it because he thought one of his buddies had borrowed it to drive up to Gettys-

burg to a football game. We couldn't connect him to the hold-up, so we let him go."

"Tell me about it. How much did they get?"

"Funny thing—not a penny. They weren't after money. All they took were two small cylinders of compressed acetylene gas, the kind you can carry in your arms."

"Who was on duty at the gas station?"

"Seventeen-year-old high school kid named Lou Jackson who works there from five until close-up at nine. He didn't see their faces. There were two of them, and they had women's stockings pulled down over their kissers. They locked him in the Ladies Room."

"Anything else?"

"That's about it, Phil."

Egan added it up. Binky Byers' black Plymouth could have been the car behind Norman Feldman's in front of Hearn's Jewelry Store, the car from which Feldman thought the thugs got out to assault him. And the tanks of compressed acetylene gas had been stolen from the Towson Texaco station just two days before the safe in the Lord Calvert Hotel Jewel and Fur Shop was cut open with compressed acetylene gas. The gas had been carried into the hotel by three men, one of whom had been tentatively identified as Binky Byers.

He opened his desk drawer, fumbled around, and found the little metal gauge that had been

picked up from under the chair of the Jewel and Fur Shop. He dropped the gauge in his topcoat pocket, picked up the black Chevvie at the police garage on Gay Street, and headed out York Road towards Towson. As he approached Taylor Avenue, he saw the Texaco station on his right.

It was too early for the boy who had been working on the night of the theft to be on the job, but the man who leased the station was there.

He introduced himself. "Lieutenant Egan, Baltimore Police Department. Understand you were robbed of two tanks of acetylene gas about two weeks ago."

"That's right."

"Do you sell compressed acetylene gas?"

"No, we're just agents for the North Baltimore Industrial Supply Company. The customers pick up full tanks here and drop off the empties. We get a commission."

He showed the man the gauge. "Could this have come from one of your tanks?"

"Come on back and we'll see."

He led Egan to the back of the garage, where full and empty tanks of compressed acetylene gas awaited pickup. The man unscrewed the gauge from one of the empties and screwed on the gauge Egan had handed him. It fit perfectly.

"There's your answer," the man

said, unscrewing the gauge and handing it back.

Egan sighed. "Well, part of it. We know it's off a North Baltimore Industrial Supply Company tank. Mind if I use your phone?"

"Help yourself."

Egan called the office of the company that owned the tanks. Were any of their tanks unaccounted for? The voice on the other end of the wire said sharply: "Who wants to know?" Egan snapped back, "Lieutenant Egan, Baltimore Police Department." He'd check it, it would take a couple of minutes, the voice replied, much more courteously.

When he came back on he said: "All accounted for but two. They were stolen from a gas station in Towson a couple of weeks ago."

Egan thanked him and hung up.

There was no doubt about it. The gas station had been robbed of the two tanks for the sole purpose of cracking the Lord Calvert Jewel and Fur Shop. Since lab experts estimated that had used up less than one tank, the gang still had a full tank to use on their next job, which, according to underworld scuttlebutt, would be any day now.

674 Preston Street was right in the middle of the area where the red pins on the map indicated that the jewel thieves were holed up. An unmarked police car containing two detectives from the Criminal Investigation Detail was

parked across the street at various inconspicuous locations twenty-four hours a day.

In the alley near the back door of the old-fashioned, three-story gray stone house, a three-man crew from the "telephone company" had dug a hole and over-ralled detectives worked on the "underground cables" around the clock.

These repairmen had explored the house thoroughly. 3B was on the top floor front overlooking Preston Street. It consisted of four small rooms and a bath, and was reached by a small self-service elevator recently installed in the old mansion which had been converted into an apartment house.

There were three apartments on each floor. The other occupants of the house seemed to be mostly young or middle-aged working couples. The house didn't allow children. It was quiet, undistinguished, respectable—a perfect hole-up for a gang of clever jewel thieves.

Only the three men occupying it weren't clever. They were petty hoodlums, hanging on the outer fringe of the national crime syndicate that dominated the Baltimore underworld.

VI

THE NEXT TIME Egan ate at Muriel's, she asked him, as they sipped their pre-dinner martinis:

"Why don't you arrest those three punks you're cat-and-mousing up there on Preston Street? After all, you can connect them to the last two robberies."

He shook his head. "They're connected, but just barely so. I want that gang's brains, not just its muscle. They're getting ready to hit again, and when they do we'll be waiting for them."

"It's none of my business," she said, "but aren't you overlooking one important angle?"

"All the angles I can overlook from here are pretty good."

"Lecher!" She drew her house-coat tighter. "No, seriously, Phil, your locksmith is obviously the brains of the outfit. He had to learn locksmithing somewhere, didn't he?"

He said thoughtfully: "It isn't something you just pick up."

"Where do they teach it?" she asked.

"Trade schools, YMCA courses, night schools. Places like that."

"You said the gang was local, so chances are your brain studied locksmithing here. The schools probably keep records of their graduates. Go through the records and check out any that look interesting."

"That is an angle that would bear investigating," he said. "And that's a curve that would also—"

She laughed and drew away from him. "Oh, cut it out. I'm serious. Hurry up and catch those

jewel thieves so we can start having fun again."

What she had said about the locksmith started him thinking, though. It was like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack, but even a 1000 to 1 shot looked like good odds in this case.

The next morning he called in Detective Sergeant Terence Clancy. "Check out all the trade schools, the YMCA's, the night schools, and any other places you can think of that might teach locksmithing. Go back ten years and list all their graduates, what they're doing now, and where."

Clancy groaned. "Hell, Phil, there are eighteen public trade schools alone in town. I know, because I had to check them once before. This'll take to Christmas at least."

"Take two men to help you. And hurry it up!"

Clancy groaned loudly and went out, but Egan knew he'd get the list in a couple of days. Clancy was a griper, but a good man.

From the stakeout on Preston Street he learned that Byers, Mahaffey, and Visconti had two visitors practically every night. One was a tall, thin man of about thirty who wore horn-rimmed glasses and drove a sporty little red Italian sports car. The other was a man of medium height, stocky, who arrived in a blue panel truck marked "Elite Bakery, 3714 Harford Road." The license plate on the

sports car was Maryland 292-861; that on the panel truck was Maryland 728-592.

He called the Motor Vehicle Department. "This is Lieutenant Egan, Police Department. Will you check out these license plates for me? Maryland 292-861, and Maryland 728-592."

The girl on the other end said: "Just a minute, Lieutenant." Then, after a long pause: "Here they are, Lieutenant. Maryland 292-861 is a Fiat sports car and it is registered in the name of Mrs. Stuart R. Heisman, 1821 Belair Road. Maryland 728-592 is a Ford panel truck registered in the name of Harold J. O'Konski, 3714 Harford Road."

"Thank you, honey," said Egan.

The next thing to do was to find out as much as possible about the men who drove to the nightly rendezvous with Byers, Mahaffey, and Visconti.

He had traffic cops stop both men to look at driver's licenses and ask routine questions. Thus he learned that the driver of the sports car was Stuart R. Heisman, out of the army about a year, married, no children, worked as a pharmacist at the Belair Drug Store near his home on Belair road. He answered questions easily, was self-possessed, and seemed all right.

The Ford panel truck was driven by Harold J. O'Konski, 31, also out of the army about a year, married, no children. He and his wife ran the Elite Bakery on Harford

Road. They lived over the bakery, and O'Konski used the truck to deliver pies, cakes, and other baked goods to restaurants in the northeast Baltimore area. He was laconic, maybe even a bit surly, but he, too, seemed all right.

But a pharmacist and a baker as the brains of a gang that included simple thugs like Byers, Visconti, and Mahaffey? It didn't add up.

Then, suddenly, everything began to fall into place, as it usually does when the police have done their homework well. A routine check with Identification disclosed that while Heisman was completely clean, O'Konski had been picked up leaving the scene of a crime at a shopping center not far from his bakery and home.

A sporting goods store had been held up about a week before, by four men wearing stocking masks. But O'Konski claimed that he had merely been delivering pies to a restaurant in the shopping center and had tried to speed away when he heard the police sirens, not wanting to get mixed up in anything. They didn't really have anything on him, and he had been released with a reprimand.

Of course Egan had heard about the hold-up of the sporting goods store, but it was Burglary's case, not his, and he hadn't paid too much attention. But with the discovery that O'Konski had been at the scene of the crime, he was all ears. What had been taken from



the sporting goods store, he asked Identification.

Five Colt .38 revolvers and about a hundred rounds of ammunition, Identification reported. No money! Only the guns and ammo. The hold-up men had ignored \$138.60 in the till.

The M.O. had been the same as in the hold-up of the Texaco station in Towsón. The thieves had ignored everything except what they needed for their next job. And, if their previous M.O. meant anything, that next job must be close at hand.

Two days later the complaining Clancy brought in his list of all the locksmiths graduated from trade, YMCA, and night schools during the past ten years. First, Egan had a secretary pick out of it—with the cooperation of Identification—

any locksmiths with known criminal records. There were five. One had recently died, two were back in prison, one had spent the last two months in Johns Hopkins Hospital, and one was now a bartender on The Block with an airtight alibi. Nothing there.

Next, he had her pick out all the trained locksmiths who were now engaged in another profession, or were unemployed. There were 247 names on this list.

And, about a third of the way down the list, was pay-dirt. It read: Heisman, Stuart R. Graduated Ensor Street Commercial and Trade School, June 1958. U.S. Army, 1958-1961. Present address: 1821 Belair Road. Present occupation: Pharmacist, Belair Drug Store, 1647 Belair Road.

Egan went down the police garage, picked up the black Chevvie, and drove out to the Ensor Street Commercial and Trade School. The principal there turned out to be a white-haired old gentleman named Brierly who had occupied his position for twenty-one years.

"I remember Stuart Heisman very well," he told Egan. "Quiet, studious boy, with an inventive mind. I remember one thing he put together while he was here. He could have patented it, it was that good."

"What was that, sir?"

"A key-maker. It was a box-like thing. It would probe any lock with a very slender gauge and then re-

cord the depth of the tumblers, the spring tensions, and all the rest. Then you fed in a piece of metal, turned a dial to the proper setting, and out dropped your new key. I wonder if he ever did anything with it?"

"Well," said Egan guardedly, "I don't know, but I think he did."

Old Mr. Brierly said: "If you could get hold of his friend—they roomed together at the YMCA on Franklin Street while they were in school here—he could tell you more about Heisman. They were inseparable. Went into the army together, as a matter of fact. Oh, what was his name?"

"Was he a locksmith, too?"

"No. He studied welding—acetylene gas welding. Pretty good at it, too."

"Could it have been O'Konski, sir?"

"That's it—Harold O'Konski. You know him?"

"A little. Well, thank you, Mr. Brierly. You've been very helpful." Egan rose to go.

The old man said: "I hope Stuart isn't in any trouble."

"We don't know yet. Goodbye, Mr. Brierly."

VII

NOW CAME THE long wait. The Heisman and O'Konski residences were also staked out by inconspicuous, unmarked cars that kept changing location. The "tele-

phone repairmen" worked around the clock by temporary lights strung in the alley in back of 674 Preston Street.

Byers, Mahaffey, and Visconti rarely left their apartment now except to go to the supermarket or a neighborhood bar. Heisman and O'Konski came every night and rarely left before eleven. And from The Block the stoolies whispered a Greek chorus: soon, soon, soon.

"I have a hunch it'll be when they think we are least likely to expect a major crime," Egan told Muriel. "Like on a Sunday night, or the night before a holiday."

"Thanksgiving's coming up next week."

"Thanksgiving eve. My Irish intuition says that'll be it. The little people are all piping 'Thanksgiving eve, Thanksgiving eve.' Well, we're ready. One thing worries me."

"What's that, Sweetie?" Her tone was casual, but there was concern in it. She loved this man.

"This time they've got guns. That means they figure they might have to use them."

She said soberly: "Phil, promise me something. When it's over, come up here. I don't care what time it is or anything. Just come up."

"Will do," he said softly, kissing her.

On the Wednesday afternoon before Thanksgiving, Egan was tense, chain-smoking little cigars.

Outside of Police Headquarters, in downtown Baltimore, people were already in a holiday mood, and the bars were filling up. Hourly reports were coming in from the stakeouts on Belair Road, Harford Road, and Preston Street.

By 4:30 P.M. Byers, Mahaffey, and Visconti had not left the apartment. O'Konski was still delivering pies; Heisman was filling prescriptions in the drug-store. He knew that Heisman would get off work at five and that the Elite Bakery would close at six.

He felt it in his bones—tonight's the night. He had learned to trust his hunches, and he trusted this one. He took a last look at the map with its circle of red pins with one big pin squarely in the center, representing the gang's only downtown job, the safe-cracking at the Lord Calvert Jewel and Fur Shop.

He checked the Smith and Wesson .44 in his shoulder holster, put on his topcoat, and called Detective Terence Clancy.

"Let's go, Terry," he said tightly. The two men went over to the police garage to pick up the black Chevvie.

Up at the Preston Street stakeout everything was ready.

Egan checked his little fleet. On Preston Street across from the apartment was the black Chevvie with himself and Clancy. Further down the street, in front of a neighborhood bar, was another unmarked car, a battered tan

Buick about seven years old. In it were Detective Sergeants Lou Grissom and Con McClure, both big, hard men.

McClure was oddly dressed for a detective on duty. He wore an old gray sweater, frayed blue-jeans, ancient shoes that were run down at the heels and splitting at the seams. On his head was a blue knitted seaman's cap somewhat the worse for wear. A stubble of beard adorned his chin and his gray-brown hair was growing down the back of his neck. He looked like a bum, a wino—which was the exact idea. But he had something most bums didn't—a neat little Smith and Wesson .32 in the pocket of his dirty blue-jeans.

Finally, parked in the alley beside the excavation made by the "telephone repairmen" was a blue Volkswagen station wagon containing—conspicuously—coils of wire and various types of telephone repair equipment. On its door in gray was the bell insignia and the words CHEASAPEAKE TELEPHONE COMPANY. The three "repairmen" in the light blue jumpers of the phone company were Detectives Kohnstamm, Smyth, and Murphy—good men all.

Communication between all three of the groups on Preston Street was by walkie-talkie. Phil Egan was using the police radio only to communicate with the stakeouts on Belair Road and Har-

ford Road, and then only by a code he had worked out. The gang's cars undoubtedly had radios equipped to pick up police calls, and there were probably similarly-equipped radios in the homes of Heisman and O'Konski, and in the apartment at 674 Preston.

Egan had ordered the cars on stakeout on Belair Road and Harford Road not to tail Heisman and O'Konski as they drove to the rendezvous on Preston Street. These tails would have to cover a considerable distance and might be discovered, causing the gang to break off its plans.

But suppose the rendezvous was not at the Preston Street apartment? Or suppose the gang set out in four or five cars—how could he tail them with three? He felt a moment of panic, but it passed.

He had to go with the probables, and the most probable place of rendezvous was Preston Street, in the center of town, rather than on Belair Road or Harford Road, out in suburbia. Besides, a meeting at the homes of O'Konski or Heisman would involve their wives. Preston Street was the best bet. If it turned out not to be Preston Street, he would just have to play it by ear, that was all. He shrugged and lit another little cigar.

At a few minutes before nine P.M. the police radio crackled: "Car X to Sea Lion—Car X to Sea Lion."

Egan said tightly: "Sea Lion. Come in, X."

Car X replied: "Two drunks in a knife fight at Market and East Baltimore."

Egan replied: "Got you, X. Roger."

Heisman had left his Harford Road home in the Fiat sports car.

Thirty seconds later the radio crackled again: "Car Y to Sea Lion—Car Y to Sea Lion."

Egan said hoarsely: "Sea Lion. Come in, Car Y."

Car Y replied: "Investigate hold-up of liquor store at Howard and Fayette."

Egan said: "Will do. Roger."

O'Konski had left the bakery on Belair Road in the blue Ford panel truck.

O'Konski arrived at 9:32. He parked the Elite Bakery truck in the alley right in back of the Chesapeake Telephone Company's Volkswagen. The three repairmen in their blue jumpers paid—or seemed to pay—no heed as he went in the back door and up the stairs to the third floor of 674 Preston.

Ten minutes later the Fiat came slowly down Preston Street, found a parking space in front of the house next door to 674, and Heisman got out. He went in the front door of 674.

Byers' black Plymouth was parked in front of the apartment house, right where it usually was. The house had no garages; its ten-

ants had to leave their cars on the street.

By 11:30 the tensed-up men had begun to feel somewhat let down. Nobody had come out of the house, and it looked like a dry run. Egan slouched behind the wheel of the Chevvie, chewing the stub of a little cigar, his topcoat pulled up around his ears against the November chill. He never wore a hat.

At 12:10 A.M. O'Konski and Heisman came out of the front door of the house, conversed briefly for a moment, and then O'Konski went back to the alley where he had parked the Elite Bakery truck. Heisman headed for the Fiat parked in front of the house next door. Upstairs in Apartment 3B the lights went off.

Had Byers, Mahaffey, and Visconti gone to bed so quickly? Egan's heart dropped into the pit of his stomach. But he picked up the walkie-talkie.

"All right, everybody," he said. "Here's the way we'll play it: Clancy and I'll take Heisman. You telephone guys stay with O'Konski. If and when the black Plymouth goes, Grissom and McClure will stick with it. Looks like a dry run, but we've got to play it out."

The racy little Fiat, with the tall, tweedy, pipe-smoking Heisman at the wheel, turned north on St. Paul Street with Egan and Clancy in the

Chevvie three cars behind it. It went right at North Avenue, turned into Belair Road, and proceeded northeast at a leisurely pace. Heisman put it in the garage of his attractive two-story house. Fifteen minutes later all the lights were out.

Gone to bed. A goddam dry run. But Egan decided to hang on. The hunch was fading, but it was still there. He located the stakeout car and told the two detectives in it to go home; he and Clancy would take over, and stay on the job all night, if they had to.

The men going off duty left them a thermos half full of black coffee. Egan and Clancy sat there, about half a block down from Heisman's house, on the other side of the broad street. There were several other cars parked along the highway that was also U.S. Route 1, and the black Chevvie was inconspicuous. They sipped coffee, smoked, and listened to the police radio. Even at that hour of the night, there was a good deal of traffic.

At about 3:30 A.M. a light came on in an upstairs room of the Heisman home. Egan nudged the dozing Clancy.

At 3:45 Heisman, carrying a small tan attache case, came out of the house, went into the garage, and drove out a car they hadn't seen before, a black Mercury about two years old, as inconspicuous as their own. It turned south-

west, towards the downtown area. The Chevvie followed, keeping two blocks and several cars back.

Suddenly Heisman gunned the powerful Mercury and it shot ahead. Tires screaming, it turned right on Belvidere Avenue. Phil Egan cut out and passed several trucks, racing after it. Had Heisman spotted them, or was he merely taking the usual underworld precaution against a possible police tail?

Heisman, tires screeching, turned right on Loch Raven Boulevard. By the time the Chevvie got around the corner, the Mercury had vanished in the maze of side streets.

"God damn!" the frustrated Egan shouted.

Heisman had shaken them. They searched the side streets between Belvidere Avenue and Cold Spring Lane for fifteen minutes, without success. The pigeon had flown the coop.

Shaking with anger and nervous tension, Egan headed for Preston Street. He turned on the walkie-talkie, but couldn't raise anybody. The other cars were out of range. He didn't dare use the police radio—he hadn't made up any code to cover this situation.

A few minutes later he tried the walkie-talkie again. This time there was an answering click and a faint voice said: "I read you, Phil, but just barely. This is Lou Grissom in the Buick. We're tailing

Byers' black Plymouth. He and his two pals left the apartment about half an hour ago. They've just been driving around. Right now we're on Erdman Avenue, heading northwest towards thirty-third Street at about thirty-five miles an hour. Over."

Egan shouted: "Hang on, Lou! We've lost Heisman. We'll pick you up at the corner of Loch Raven Boulevard and thirty-third. Over and out."

A few seconds brought them to the intersection of Loch Raven Boulevard and 33rd Street. They turned off their lights, parked, and waited. At this point, the street that had been Erdman Avenue became 33rd Street.

In about thirty seconds they came into view, the black Plymouth with Byers, Visconti, and Mahaffey in the front seat, going slowly down 33rd Street. Behind the Plymouth was a truck and behind the truck and about a block back was the tan Buick. The black Chevvie turned the corner and pulled in about half a block behind the Buick, and the little procession crawled slowly west towards North Charles Street.

Egan picked up the walkie-talkie again. "Lou, let us take over. You drop back and follow along. That damned tan color is too easy to spot."

"Roger," replied Grissoin. The Buick slowed and Egan passed it, pulling in behind the truck.

VIII

AT THE CORNER of 33rd Street and York Road there was an all-night diner. The Plymouth parked in front of it and Byers, Mahaffey, and Visconti went in and ordered coffee. Egan parked the Chevvie across the street from the diner, and awaited developments. He saw the tan Buick parked about a block back, too far to be identified from the diner.

About five minutes later O'Konski's Elite Bakery truck appeared, parked behind Byers' Plymouth, and O'Konski went into the diner. A Chesapeake Telephone Company repair truck passed the diner, turned into a side street, and parked.

Egan breathed a sigh of relief. He picked up the walkie-talkie. "Nice going, phone company. The pigeons are roosting. One more to come. Over and out."

They didn't have long to wait. The Mercury appeared, coming slowly up 33rd street, made the York Road turn, and parked. Heisman went into the diner.

It was exactly 4:15 A.M.

Five minutes later Heisman, O'Konski, Byers, Mahaffey, and Visconti emerged from the diner and headed for their respective cars.

Egan grabbed the walkie-talkie. "Same M.O. as before. Take the same car, and for God's sake don't lose it!"

The three gang cars all turned into York Road and proceeded slowly south, towards the downtown area, followed at a distance of two blocks by the three police vehicles.

At North Avenue each of the three gang cars suddenly bolted in a different direction. Heisman gunned the Mercury west on North Avenue; O'Konski shot off east towards Harford Road; Byers went straight south on York Road, which at this point became Greenmount Avenue.

Heisman slowed again, then speeded up, turned left on St. Paul Street, and headed downtown. Egan, a block behind, clung to him like a used car dealer to a sweepstakes winner.

The walkie-talkie clicked. Lou Grissom said mournfully: "Sorry, Phil, we lost ours. The Plymouth shook us. It turned east on Biddle Street. A trailer-truck got between us and when we passed it the Plymouth was gone."

"Never mind," said Egan. "I think we're getting close. Come fast and fall in behind me about Monument Street. Over and out."

At St. Paul and Monument he saw by the rear view mirror that the Buick had come up and was following about two blocks back.

Heisman, apparently satisfied that he was not being followed, turned west off St. Paul Street, crossed Howard in the heart of the downtown shopping and the-

atrical district, turned into Saratoga, then went left off Saratoga on to Green Street.

He parked two stores down from the Lattman Jewelry Store, a large, flashy emporium that specialized in selling jewelry on time at high interest rates to not-too-prosperous customers.

The area, although downtown, was a bit seedy. Not far from brightly-lighted Howard Street, it was dark and deserted at 4:45 A.M.

Egan drove slowly past Green Street and saw Heisman parked near the jewelry store. He kept on going and parked on Saratoga, out of sight of Heisman. A chill fall wind keened down the dark, empty street.

The tan Buick passed him, went around the block, and came back up to park on Saratoga, just across Green Street from the Chevvie, and also out of Heisman's sight.

The Elite Bakery truck turned into Green Street off Fayette. O'Konski parked across the street from Heisman and walked over to join the latter in the front seat of the Mercury. Coming into Green off Fayette, he had not seen the Buick and the Chevvie parked on opposite corners of Saratoga and Green.

In a few minutes Byers' black Plymouth appeared, also turning into Green from Fayette. A block behind it the telephone company truck went on past Green Street,

turned the corner, and headed for Saratoga Street. It parked behind the Buick. All the walkie-talkies were open.

"This is it," Egan said. "Con, do your stuff!"

Detective Con McClure, dressed and smelling like a bum, took a pint of cheap whiskey from the Buick's glove compartment, spattered some over his clothes, and, bottle in hand, staggered towards Green Street.

He saw Byers, acting as a lookout, walking slowly up towards Saratoga Street, and Visconti, also a lookout, standing in a doorway near Fayette Street. Heisman, carrying the attache case, O'Konski, cradling a small cylinder of acetylene gas in his arms, and Mahaffey, one of the stolen Colt .38's in hand, were walking rapidly towards the entrance to the jewelry store.

In a few seconds Byers would reach the corner of Green and Saratoga, see the three police cars, get suspicious, and give the alarm.

McClure, waving his bottle, staggered towards him, shouting: "Have a lil drink, fren!"

Byers stopped, put his hand in his pocket, then drew it out empty. He called to the men in the jewelry store doorway: "Just a goddam drunk. Nothing to worry about."

McClure gripped Byers by the coat lapel. "Jus' one won't hurt, fren'. S'my birthday!"

Byers laughed good-naturedly. "Okay," he said. "Gimme the damn bottle."

Out of the corner of his eye McClure saw Heisman take a small black box out of the attache case, hold it up to the lock, adjust a dial, and—*clink*. Out fell a newly-made key.

Heisman picked it up, unlocked the door, and he and O'Konski went in. Mahaffey, gun in hand, nervously watched Byers and the "bum."

"Get rid of him!" he growled.

"Go sleep it off in some alley," said Byers, shaking himself loose from McClure's grasp.

McClure hurled the whiskey bottle to the pavement, where it smashed with the sound of a firecracker.

That was the signal they'd been waiting for. The six detectives erupted from their cars, guns in hand, and raced around the corner towards the jewelry store.

The "bum" yanked out his gun, but Mahaffey's shot caught him in the right hip and he went down. As he fell he fired and hit Mahaffey in the groin. Mahaffey dropped his gun and sank slowly to the pavement, his hands clutching the wound.

Byers got off one shot that sang by Egan's ear. Egan's own bullet hit him in the neck and Byers flopped to the sidewalk like a stranded fish, the blood gurgling through the hole in his throat, and

running across the sidewalk into the gutter.

Visconti was far enough away to make a run for the Elite Bakery truck. He got it started and raced for Saratoga Street, trying to hit Steve Kohnstamm, who was running across the street towards the jewelry store. Steve dove out of the way, breaking his wrist as he fell. His own gun cluttered to the pavement.

Egan, Clancy, Grissom, and Smyth riddled the windshield; a red flower blossomed in the middle of Visconti's face. The truck veered crazily, careened towards the sidewalk, and smashed through the display window of a men's clothing store.

The sudden burst of noise was now replaced by an eerie silence. The interior of the jewelry store was dark and quiet. Detective Murphy, gun in hand, had gone down an alley to guard the rear door.

The street looked like a battle scene. Visconti, dead, his face and body full of glass splinters, hung half in and half out of the driver's seat of the Elite Bakery truck, his blood dripping on the neat window display of men's white button-down shirts.

Byers, not dead but dying, lay face down on the sidewalk, the blood still bubbling out of the hole in his throat. Mahaffey lay groaning in front of the jewelry store, his hands over the wound in his

groin, blood seeping through them.

Detective McClure, the wounded "bum"—had half propped himself against a lamp post. Detective Kohnstamm sat on the sidewalk with his feet in the gutter, holding his head down, trying to keep from fainting as his right hand flopped grotesquely at the end of his broken wrist.

Egan yelled into the dark void of the jewelry store. "You've had it, Heisman! Back door's covered! Throw out those thirty-eights!"

Silence. Then a .38 was kicked out through the wide-open door, followed by another. O'Konski and Heisman, hands joined behind their necks, came out.

By now squad cars and ambulances were pouring into the area, and a small crowd had materialized out of nowhere to gape in amazement at the bodies, the blood, the prisoners. Phil Egan phoned Mike Casey, then hustled Heisman and O'Konski, handcuffed together, into the back seat of the Chevvie for the ride down to Headquarters. Clancy, gun in hand, sat with them, and Smyth rode up front with Phil.

Heisman, the brain, was calm but dejected. O'Konski, smothered in gloom, snarled and cursed and refused to talk.

Heisman, clinically interested in the failure of his ingenious plan, said: "Where did I goof? What tipped you?"

Egan replied: "Byers, when he

left his car out near that Texaco station in Towson. How'd he happen to do that?"

Heisman gritted his teeth. "The fat, stupid jerk! Our three goons—the Outfit provided them, partly to protect us and partly to make sure we didn't pull a double cross—had the Plymouth and the Bakery truck that night. Byers was the lookout. After the job, he couldn't get the Plymouth going right away, so he panicked and jumped in the truck with the others. Next time it won't—"

Egan interrupted. "There won't be a next time, Heisman. You're going on an extended vacation."

Heisman was silent.

After Heisman and O'Konski had been booked and jailed, Egan wrote out his report. Dawn was beginning to light the eastern sky as he headed the black Chevvie towards Muriel's apartment on Mount Vernon Place. He had promised to come up no matter what time it was, so he did.

She answered the bell in a revealing black negligee, but it was easy to tell she hadn't been sleeping. Her eyes were red and tired-looking and the ash trays were full of lipstick-stained, half-smoked butts.

Wordlessly they embraced.

He sank into an easy chair. "I could use a drink," he said. "Or two or three."

She mixed him a stiff bourbon and water, and as he sipped it he told her all about it. "Heisman and O'Konski planned the whole thing when they were in the army together. It was in the army that O'Konski learned to be a baker and Heisman a pharmacist. They learned those trades as a cover. They even got married as a cover. Heisman is a genius but he has the heart of a born thief who'd rather steal ten bucks than make a hundred legit.

"If he patents that key-making thing of his he'll pile up a fortune in prison. He took the whole plan to the syndicate boys and they okayed it for a forty percent cut. Byers, Visconti, and Mahaffey were lent to Heisman as muscle, to do the necessary stealing, act as lookouts, and stuff like that. Also to see that Heisman and O'Konski didn't cross the big boys.

"We got to them largely through Byers, although your idea about the locksmiths was a big help. Byers is dead. So is Visconti. Mahaffey is shot up and may not make it. Con McClure has a smashed hip and Steve Kohnstamm a broken wrist."

"God," she murmured. "What a night!"

As Thanksgiving Day dawned, they drank bourbon and ate some scrambled eggs and finally fell asleep in each other's arms on the floor in front of the fireplace.

Attention: New MIKE SHAYNE Readers



If you're new to the magazine, and have just discovered the wide, exciting variety of the magazine's mystery story fare there's a golden harvest of reading pleasure awaiting you in the back numbers which many new readers have been asking for. We've a few copies left of the 12 issues published during last year—1962. They are available and are yours at the bargain prices of 35¢ for one; 70¢ for 2 issues; 3 issues for \$1.00 and all 12 issues for only \$4.00. Just check off the copies you want alongside of the monthly issues listed below—fill in the handy coupon—and mail to us with your check, money order or cash. We pay postage in the United States: add one dollar for 12 issues only to foreign countries, including Canada, Mexico and Pan American countries. Here are the partial contents of the dozen issues—outstanding stories of all lengths by famed mystery story writers:

JAN. "Not Enough Clues" a Mike Shayne thriller by Brett Halliday; "The Fifty Grand Caper" a complete long novel by Paul W. Fairman; and short stories by McClary, Rubin and Lipton.

FEB. "Corpse in the Showcase" a Mike Shayne novelet by Brett Halliday; exciting novelets by Alson J. Smith, Robert B. Johnson and Michael Avallone; plus five short stories.

MAR. "Murder Strikes Out" a Mike Shayne baseball novelet by Brett Halliday; a short suspense novel by Charles W. Runyon; and short stories by Porges, Lacy, Audemars and others.

APRIL "The Restless Redhead" a Mike Shayne thriller by Brett Halliday; a book-length Johnny Liddell novel by Frank Kanes and short stories by Zuroy, Leinster, Powell and others.

MAY "Partners in Death" a Mike Shayne novelet by Brett Halliday; novelets by Helen McCloy and Thomas C. McClary; and short stories by Avallone, Leinster, Lipton and others.

JUNE "The Murder Stamps" a long Mike Shayne novelet by Brett Halliday; an exciting short novel by Peter Queintin; plus six shorts by Roy Vickers, Martin Suto and others.

JULY "Margin for Terror" a Mike Shayne story by Brett Halliday; a short mystery novel by Frank Struan; and five stories by John Creasey, Richart Curtis, and many others.

AUG. "The Frightened Target" a Mike Shayne story by Brett Halliday; an Ed Rivers complete novel by Talmage Powell and shorts by Will Jenkins, Dennis Lynds and many others.

SEPT. "The Friendly Corpse" a long Mike Shayne novelet by Brett Halliday; an Ed Noon novelet by Michael Avallone; a macabre thriller by Robert Bloch; plus five short stories.

OCT. "The Guilty Bystander" a Mike Shayne novelet by Brett Halliday; a long novelet by Bruno Fischer; and stories by Hal Ellison, Dennis Lynds, Gordon MacCreagh and many others.

NOV. "The Girl Cried Murder" a Mike Shayne thriller by Brett Halliday; a complete suspense novel by Henry Kane; a macabre story by Ray Bradbury; and five short stories.

DEC. "Miracle or Murder" a Mike Shayne novelet by Brett Halliday; a long F.B.I. novelet by Bruce Cassiday; an exciting novelet by Cornell Woolrich and thrilling short stories.

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May, 1963

C. O. D. TO A CORPSE

"I am a licensed private eye," Chip pointed out.

"You are an evil eye," Aunt Tilly corrected.

by **TIGHE JARRATT**

THERE WERE SEVEN messages to phone Aunt Tilly when Chip Stack checked his answering service. Imperative. Aunt Tilly spoke with the authority of a million dollars and the boss of the Stack clan.

Chip snapped a cigarette into his deceptively amiable face and considered that Aunt Tilly carried her gold-headed cane not from infirmity, but to wallop hell out of any purse snatcher or mugger

foolish enough to disregard the glint of her bird-bright eyes. She knew her nephew without illusions, disapproved of him entirely, and had once characterized him a renegade to the human race. Aside from that, she liked him.

But not seven phone calls worth. This was trouble. Chip took a neat drink for fortification, expanded his breath, and intrepidly dialed her number, feeling much like a soldier charging a flame

A NEW CHIP STACK STORY



throwing tank with his bayonet.

"Chip Stack," she greeted him. "How long since your deeply lamented Uncle Arthur was laid at rest?"

"Why," he grunted with surprise, and flicked a glance at the calendar. "It was three weeks ago last Monday—twenty-three days. Is something desecrating his memory?"

"Racketeers," she sniffed. "Cheap ones, too, and how he loathed the type! Unless it was you?"

"I appreciate the suspicion," he said dryly. "Has somebody a bequest, or dug up the story of how he made his first fifty thousand?"

"Somebody," she stated, "used his departure to swindle me out of fifteen dollars and forty-two cents."

"Why, forty-two cents?" Chip asked.

"Spécial handling. It was a Parcel Post—C.O.D."

"Oh, one of those," he muttered. "They sent him a letter that they'd picked up an unclaimed package addressed to him and thought it might be important. And you wrote back to send it immediately?"

"It's passing strange that you know the details so intimately," she crackled.

"Well," he grinned, "it's a pretty old con game. They used to send C.O.D.'s directly to the obituary list, but the Federals stepped on

that. Now they have to get a written order, but the departed person's relatives usually ask for delivery if the sum involved is not too great. It still turns out expensive for a pair of cheap slippers or a ten cent pen."

"I must say, you are well informed," she commented. "I suppose you'd call on the Fifth Amendment if I asked you to do something about it?"

He said cautiously, "I don't mind the nuisance of trailing them down, but the case will be dismissed, even if I get them into court."

"Who said anything about court?" she barked. "I'm simply sure that if common swindlers can think of a trick that foul, you'll think of something more so, and I want them whamied."

"I am a licensed private eye," he pointed out.

"You're an evil eye," she corrected. "And I want these tricksters chastised."

Aunt Tilly hung up, sharply, before he could remonstrate. So that was that! She had stated what she wanted, and when a million dollar aunt said she wanted something done, you did it. The question was—what? He should have lured an idea out of her. She had a very lively imagination herself, as she must have had to hook his departed, skinflint uncle.

He mixed another drink, picked up the evening paper and

stretched out on the couch to check the day's obituaries. If it had been a three dollar C.O.D. involved, his job would have been relatively easy. The con artists would have sent out a form letter to the entire list of departed.

But if they were working the fifteen dollar bracket, they had to make their sucker list selective. A workman's family might be more sentimental about his passing than more substantial folk. But it would think twice about parting with fifteen dollars for some unknown *doodad* that he'd supposedly ordered. A fifteen dollar swindle would be among the upper crust.

It was a loathesome but safe racket for the swindlers, of course. C.O.D.'s cannot be opened for inspection before the C.O.D. charge is paid. Even when hooked with a ten cent pen or some other trivial item, few people in grief and mourning would do anything about it. Even if they grew incensed, there was little that they could do legally. The delivery had been ordered by some member of the family in writing, and the original letter from the swindlers had stated that the contents of the package was not known.

Occasionally, the feather merchants hit the eighty and ninety dollar brackets, just short of grand larceny. But fifteen dollars was a smarter sum. More suckers bit, fewer made trouble, and ten or twenty of those deals a day pro-

vided a nice profit for the time it took to write the original letters.

But—it was one helluva sum from Chip Stack's standpoint. It meant looking up the addresses of the day's deceased in various ways to select those living in more expensive sections of the city. Many of the more elite were not listed in the phone book. He had to search them through the Social Register or Poor's list of executives, and in one case, a church director's manual.

"The things I do for my country!" Stack growled as he faced the task. But then, there was almost nothing that he would not do for million dollar Aunt Tilly.

He completed his list and sat there frowning at it. Something ghoulish about preying off the dead. Personally, he preferred the living, such as well rounded, mink-stealing, strawberry blondes.

The swindlers were easy enough to figure. They would probably wait three days after an obit to pull their racket. That would bring their letter of inquiry to the family on the fourth or fifth day, after the worst of the grief had subsided. It would probably bear some faked letterhead such as—The National Unclaimed Package Recovery Service. They'd have a mail address somewhere, which they'd change every few weeks as a routine precaution against some old style citizen whose outrage might burst his due regard for the

laws that protect crooks and creeps.

On the fourth day, Stack took his preferred list from the file and began to phone. The first two calls were answered by butlers. All mail addressed to the deceased was being forwarded to the estate lawyers they said, so that eliminated them. The next call was answered by the very cool and aloof voice of a social secretary.

She was not at all impressed that he identified himself as Detective Stack. Her tone implied that there could not possibly be anything for a detective to phone about, and even if there were, he should await a period of decent mourning. As far as the deceased's mail was concerned, she could scarcely see that it was any of his business whether or not there had been any C.O.D.'s. But as a matter of fact, there had been a letter from a reclaiming service.

She had the letter at hand, and so could read him the usual glib explanation. It was addressed to the deceased. It stated that the Service had located a package mis-addressed to the deceased, contents unknown, but the charge amounted to \$14.50, plus postage. If the merchandise was still desired, the Service would forward it for the sum involved upon written authorization.

"Naturally, the family will accept it," the secretary informed Stack coolly. "Although it is

strange that it would be a C.O.D."

Then she recollected that Stack had said he was a detective. "There isn't something peculiar about it?"

"Well, to this extent. We think it is an item worth about ten cents. However, with your cooperation, we'd like to have you send for it."

The cool voice snapped indignant, "Why, the very idea! Pay fourteen dollars and fifty cents for a ten cent item?"

Stack winced, but had to make the gesture. "I will be happy to reimburse you."

"Oh!" the voice murmured less icily. "Very well, as soon as I receive your money order, I will instruct this company to send it. I will let you know when it arrives."

"Perfect," Stack said and hung up with a sour face. She hadn't even suggested a personal check. *Money order*, she'd said. There was something about rich people and money—they stuck together like fly paper.

He got out his American Express checks and mailed the requisite amount, wondering what the cool secretary would say if handling costs ran eight cents over. Then he re-examined the pen that his Aunt Tilly had been swindled for. Just a ten cent piece of junk, the kind of ballpoint that was sold by the hundred at any surplus mail order house.

He recalled that the first cheap ones had been made out of WW

II surplus ballbearings and tubing, and supposed that the practice might still be existent. Some of the small, fringe manufacturers would find a way to make something out of a pig's squeal, if it showed a ten cent profit on a gross.

Five days later, the social secretary was considerate enough to phone. She sounded a little more cordial. "You were right. It's a cheap pen that Mr. Satterlee never would have ordered. Shall I mail it to you?"

"If it's convenient, I'll stop by for it," he said. "There's a little urgency to catch the birds before they've flown."

That was a lie, but in spite of her chill, she had a throaty quality to her voice that promised warmth. He thought that he ought to get something for his fifteen bucks more than a ten cent pen. Come to think of it, he was a worse sucker than the victims the swindlers conned.

He was also out of luck. The secretary was big as a house. She was Mrs. Satterlee's secretary, and of course, no society dowager would have an employee better looking than herself. However, she was rather curious and jolly and invited him to lunch on the Satterlee charge account.

The luncheon check was twenty-six dollars, and she left a five dollar tip, so Stack figured that

theoretically, he came out fifty cents the winner.

She'd kept the original letter and C.O.D. wrapper, providing an address on Broadway that was a warren for phoney song publishers, bookies, pimps, dubious agents, a uranium stock company, and other assorted con artists.

The office was closed when Chip Stack got there, and the elevator man knew nothing, until a five spot jogged his memory. The tenant had been in that morning, he recalled, and gone out with an arm load of small wrapped packages. He examined the package Chip showed him. They were all like that, he nodded, some mail order business, he guessed.

Back at home, Stack found the usual impatient messages from Aunt Tilly. "What are you going to do about those foul racketeers?" she demanded. "You wouldn't be stalling until you find a way to cut in on them?"

"Now, Aunt Tilly," he remonstrated. "I'm as driven as the innocent snow."

"I know what you're driven by," she declared tartly.

"Patience," he grinned. "I'm just getting the case in hand. I think we're going to hang, draw and quarter these weasels very shortly."

"We?" she repeated with sparkling interest. Aunt Tilly was a born conspirator. "It is real dirty—dirty enough to make them feel it?"

"It will slap them where it hurts," he promised. "Now listen closely. I am sending over your pen, which seems to have been manufactured out of military surplus tubing. As a matter of fact, it contains platinum and is worth a good deal more than you paid for it."

"But it can't be! Those swindlers would never pay more than a penny for a dime pen—"

"But they don't know it," her nephew cut in. "Now what I want you to do is send this pen down to your old pal Senator Gilfoyle with an indignant letter demanding to know why the taxpayer's money is being wasted on platinum tubing that gets sold for a song as surplus."

She giggled. "That fussbudget will be roaring for a dozen investigations. But how am I supposed to know it is platinum?"

"Tell him how you got it. Tell him you consider it such an outrage upon your dearly departed's memory that you had the pen investigated."

"And then?"

"Just sit tight."

"I'll be squirming like a maiden," she said, and laughed.

Stack hung up and regarded the pen he meant to send to his aunt. Its filler contained platinum, all right, and he'd paid thirty-five bucks to have the tube made up. And now he was going to have to lay out twenty more to get a sneak

thief he knew to rob the swindler's office of their pen supply.

The robbery was easy enough. Who'd bother to lock up cheap merchandise like that? The thief was miffed however because there'd been less than five hundred pens and they were so cheesy that he'd only been able to get four dollars for the lot from a fence who unloaded his stuff to be peddled through the downtown bars.

Chip Stack chuckled when the thief phoned his grumbling report. "You'll be wishing you'd kept a few of those in a few days," he told him. "You might make a damned good deal with those swindlers to buy 'em back, and no questions asked."

Forty-eight hours later, Senator Gilfoyle loosed his thunder. He told the press that possibly "millions" of the taxpayer's money had been thrown away through the negligent handling of surplus, using the platinum pen as an example. He hinted darkly that he meant to investigate atomic waste and subversive efforts to bankrupt the country. He quoted an unnamed "expert's" opinion that the platinum tubing might contain a hundred dollars worth of platinum, and confidential information that enough tubing for ten or twenty thousand such pens, retailing at a dime apiece, had slipped through Surplus.

The papers headlined it into the

usual sensational story. Surplus was a sure-fire whipping boy because it was so complex that rarely could anything be proven or disproven. Chip Stack read the stories with mischievous humor and took a taxi to the office building of the swindlers. By the simple process of sitting on the fireescape of the floor above, he had no difficulty learning their reaction to the newspaper stories.

They hit their small, one-room office like twin cyclones, turning the place topsy turvy to find any pens that had escaped the strange theft which they were just beginning to understand. Somebody had gotten onto the error before the senator and trailed the pens to them and looted them of a veritable fortune.

The two partners screamed at each other and howled. The only way that they could recaptured any of their lost "profits" was to contact the people they had already swindled and try to con them over again.

Chip Stack left his fireescape perch with a grin and stopped at the phones in the lobby below to make contact with the sneak thief who'd taken Chip at his word earlier in the week and retrieved a handfull of the purloined ball points. His second call was to Mrs. Satterleee's secretary.

"Of course," she said, "I saw the Washington story but I thought it was probably overstated."

"A little," he said. "But the swindlers don't know anything about that—"

"And of course they'll try to get their pens back." She laughed. She was way ahead of him. "You're a very clever gentlemen, Mr. Stack. I won't speak with those gangsters if they call, so I won't upset your tea party."

Chip thought that he deserved a drink and so awarded himself, then went across town to Aunt Tilly's to find her reading the papers avidly.

"That idiot Gilfoyle never could contain his enthusiasm," she said. "A hundred dollars worth of platinum indeed! Why, an imbecile would know from the weight of it—and come to think of it, Chip, that pen you had me send Gilfoyle felt considerably heavier than the one I gave you."

"Well, there might have been a little difference," he admitted. "I had several of them. Maybe I got mixed."

She fastened her bird bright eyes upon him. "Now what happens?"

"That we have to wait and see," he grunted. He extracted the Satterlee pen and her own original from his pocket and laid them on a table. "I think you know Mrs. H. T. S. Satterlee. If the matter crops up, you might say that you were up there to express condolences and picked up this pen at her house."

"You think I'll hear from these thieves, then?"

"Like the tax collector," he said.

She clucked good humoredly and tapped her cane with anticipation. "Just let me get my claws in them!" she declared.

The phone rang and she picked it up herself without waiting for the maid. "Why, the senator certainly got in touch with you quickly!" she said with an air of surprise that would have fooled Stack himself. "I haven't even had time to find the pens since I spoke with him, but of course, I will since he needs them for investigation—"

Chip could hear a gritty male voice repeat, "Pens? But you only have one. That is, we understand you only—"

"Oh no! I have one that Mrs. Satterlee's poor husband sent for just before he passed away. He was a great friend of my husband's and I suppose they both heard about the mistake and were curious. They were both interested in metals, you know—but I don't suppose you do. Did you say you were with the Treasury?"

The speaker's cough exploded over the phone. He hastened to deny that, making some vague reference to just "Investigation."

"Well," Aunt Tilly said, "I don't suppose you can tell those things, but it's clear that the senator had you phone, and it was certainly generous of him to allow me

fifty dollars a pen, when it's really a patriotic duty—"

The speaker made a sound that conveyed extreme pain. He said nothing had been said about that to him.

"But it must have been mentioned!" she said steadfastly. "He said that he was having a hundred of them picked up in the city and they'd all be paid for at the same rate in cash."

"A hundred of them?" the speaker choked. Then he switched his tune. "But I think I can explain. You see, we're not picking them up. The manufacturer is—as it was apparently a mistake clean through."

"And of course," Aunt Tilly said with an older woman's understanding, "the manufacturer will pay, and that is really patriotic of him to try to make restitution at his own expense. When shall I expect him, Mr. — did you say, Wolf?"

He made uncertain sounds. He wanted to talk price again, but Stack guessed that he was worried an official investigator might already be on the trail and cutting them out.

"Oh really," Aunt Tilly interrupted, "if there's no money involved, it would be as easy for me to just mail them to Washington, wouldn't it?"

There was a fresh burst of rapid talk. Chip could imagine the swindler sweating. He finally said

that he'd send the manufacturer's representative right over.

Aunt Tilly hung up and giggled and smoothed her skirts. She said, "That last one really choked him! They hate to see a dollar get away, don't they? But won't they notice the weight?"

"I don't think they'll take time to notice anything except grab and run," Chip said. "They'll think a Washington man is already breathing down their necks and they'll try to beat him to every pen they can grab."

Aunt Tilly freshened a cup of tea and had just finished it when her maid announced the manufacturer's agent. Stack vanished into an adjoining room and Aunt Tilly gave her most winsome smile as the racketeer came in.

"The nation can be proud of business men like you," she greeted him. "This really wasn't your fault, and yet you're willing to take all this trouble and expense just to retrieve two pens."

He gave a fat faced, pallid smile. "We are really pretty rushed. I hope that you've located the pens?"

"Oh yes," she said. She picked them up and compared them. "I suppose I should have noticed that they're heavier than my other ball pens."

He laid a hundred dollar bill on the table and extended a pudgy

hand. Aunt Tilly placed them in his hand with force.

"You see, they are heavier," she murmured brightly. "But won't you sit down and have a cup of tea? I think another of the senator's men will be here shortly."

The swindler gulped and made excuses and rushed out stuffing the pens into his pocket. Aunt Tilly whacked her knee and laughed like Tugboat Annie.

Her nephew came forth regarding her suspiciously. "Just where did you learn to push a light weight when you want it to feel heavier?" Chip inquired.

"Oh that," she sniffed. "Well, I do read detective magazines."

Her agile mind had been caught by another thought. She was ticking on her fingers. She said thoughtfully, "You know, if those pens were worth a hundred dollars and he picks up a hundred, it would be quite a nice day's work, Chip."

"Five thousand dollars," he said. "Likewise, if he picks up a hundred, even at twenty-five dollars average, he'll be out a nice month's profits."

"I'm sure poor Arthur will rest much easier now," she said. "He did so hate to be bested." She picked up the hundred dollar bill and held it to him. "I'll just take fifteen dollars and forty-two cents, Chip, and I think I'll put you back in my will."

THE MARROW OF JUSTICE

by HAL ELLSON

The smoldering anger of the crowd awaited eruption. Detective Fiala was unconcerned—his eyes sought only one man—the murderer who, through guilt or morbid curiosity, might be lurking at the scene.

THE COFFIN WAS a plain one, finished in the shop of Carlos Martinez, without frills, stark naked wood of soft pine. Harsh sunlight splintered off it as the men carried it through the miserable street, treading its dust, stones and the scattered fire of tangerine peels withering in the heat.

It was a day of flame but, in this land of perpetual sun, not unseasonable. No more than death. The poor in their shacks and crumbling adobes knew its ghastly visits all too frequently. Funerals were commonplace and all of a kind. A plain pine box for the deceased,

four men to carry it and a small group of mourners following.

A vast crowd followed the coffin of Rosa Belmonte, the third young girl in the city to die by violation in a brief period of three months. Half-starved dogs with ribs showing, children, toddlers and beggars amidst the crowd lent it a pseudo air of carnival which was diluted by the sombre faces of adults and a muffled silence under which anger awaited eruption.

The police felt it, a news-photographer sighted it in his camera. Detective Fiala was aware of the same phenomenon, but uncon-

© 1963, by Hal Ellson



cerned with the crowd as such. His eyes sought only one man—the murderer who, through guilt or morbid disposition, might be lurking here.

No face riveted his attention till Fiala noticed the limousine, with the crowd breaking round it and the Chief of Police, Jose Santiago.

He was sitting beside his chauffeur, face bloated and dark, tinted glasses concealing incongruous blue eyes that resembled twin stones and reflected the basic nature of the man.

Without the uniform he might be the one I'm looking for, Fiala thought, turning away and moving

on with the sullen crowd that refused to acknowledge the naked violence of the sun.

The funeral went off without incident, the police were relieved, Chief Santiago satisfied. His chauffeur returned him to the Municipal building, the location of police headquarters.

As he entered his office with Captain Torres, the phone rang. He picked it up, listened, then dismissed Captain Torres with a wave of his hand. Frowning now, he spoke to his caller, Victor Quevedo, Mayor of the city and the one who had "made" him. These two were friends of a sort, but the conversation that ensued between them now was strictly business.

The murder of Rosa Belmonte, with the killer not apprehended, as in both previous murders, had created grave criticism of the police which, in turn, reflected upon Quevedo, exposing him to the machinations of his political enemies. This was the gist of Quevedo's complaint along with his sharp demand that Santiago do something and do it fast.

"Do what?" said Santiago.

"Get the killer before midnight."

Astounded, Santiago hesitated, stuttered inanely and finally managed to say, "But Victor—"

Quevedo cut him off sharply. "I am being embarrassed politically and otherwise," he snapped. "If you wish to continue as Chief of

Police, find the killer. Don't—and you're finished."

Sweating profusely, Santiago dropped the phone and sat back. Slowly with trembling hands he lit a cigarette and dispersed a cloud of smoke. His thoughts were in chaos, dark face swollen to bursting. Slowly the agitation within him receded. Behind his tinted glasses his cold eyes lit up as a face focused in his mind.

He crushed his cigarette, arose, opened the door, called Captain Torres into the office and gave him his orders: "Pick up Manuel Domingo for the murder of Rosa Belmonte."

Manuel Domingo's criminal activities were long known to the police—but murder? Captain Torres raised his brows in surprise.

"Are you sure you have the right man?" he asked.

"Are you doubting me, or my source of information?" Santiago wanted to know, asserting both the authority of his office and intimating that the phone call he'd received was the "voice" of a reliable informer.

Captain Torres flushed and retreated to the door. From there he said, "I'll pick up Manuel Domingo personally."

At nine that evening, a black sky threatened the city and the lacy jacarandas stirred to a faint errant wind from the mountains where yellow lightning ignited the empty heavens. Behind the Muni-

cipal building four bars faced the plaza, loud voices broke from each of them.

Saturday night was just beginning and musicians lolled on the plaza benches, barefoot boys shined shoes, hawked blood-red and dove-white roses on trays of cardboard, like every one else, forgetting Rosa Belmonte.

It was on this scene that Captain Torres arrived with three of his men after an intensive and fruitless search of all the usual haunts of the criminal Manuel Domingo.

Captain Torres was convinced that Domingo had fled the city when chance directed his eyes to a bench where two shoeshine boys vied for the privilege of doing the shoes of Detective Fiala.

Granting them each a shoe, Fiala, who was short and soft-fleshed, with the pallid complexion of a priest, looked up to see the strapping youthful Captain Torres and his three men confronting him.

The latter were innocuous fellows, Captain Torres an arrogant whelp, but hardly that now. He needed help and Fiala, whom he despised and who despised him, might provide the information he needed so badly.

"I am looking for Manuel Domingo," Torres announced. "Perhaps you happen to know his where-abouts?"

With a derisive smile, Fiala nodded toward a bar directly across

the street. "Manuel Domingo is in there. You're picking him up?"

"For the murder of Rosa Belmonte," Captain Torres replied and turned on his heels.

Fiala sat where he was. A half minute later Manuel Domingo came through the door of the bar across the street accompanied by Captain Torres and his three men. All five passed through the plaza and entered police headquarters.

Fiala, who had gone off duty early that day, lit a cigarette and shook his head. No matter what, Manuel Domingo's fate was sealed, the murder solved. Tomorrow the newspapers would be full of it.

In disgust, Fiala flicked his cigarette to the gutter and noticed the group of men who'd come from the bar across the street. Anger echoed in their voices; word spread quickly round the plaza: Manuel Domingo had been picked up for the murder of Rosa Belmonte. Manuel Domingo . . .

Under the black angry sky a crowd began to converge on police headquarters, but too late to give vent to its feelings, for the brief interrogation of Manuel Domingo was already completed. Guarded by police, he stepped to the sidewalk and was quickly ushered into a waiting car.

Into a second car stepped Chief of Police Santiago and Captain Torres. With an escort of ten motorcycle policemen, both cars roared off toward the scene of the

crime, a spot in the desert several miles from the outskirts of the city.

The cavalcade soon reached it, the glaring lights of cars and motorcycles focused on a tall yucca beside the road. At its foot Luis Espina, a gatherer of fibre obtained from a small spiny desert plant, had discovered the body of Rosa Belmonte.

As Manuel Domingo stepped from the car, his face took on a ghastly hue, perhaps because of the lights, perhaps out of fear now that he was at the scene of the crime. Whatever he felt, he said nothing; he appeared dazed.

A sharp command from Captain Torres sent the policemen into a wide semi-circle, with guns drawn to prevent an attempted escape. That done, Captain Torres walked to the edge of the road with Santiago and Manuel Domingo. There, on orders, he took up position, while the prisoner and Santiago proceeded to the foot of the yucca.

Once there, Manuel Domingo stopped and stood like a soldier ordered to attention. Headlights impaled him in a glaring cross-fire. A sheer wall of black enveloped this luminous area. Now the brief interrogation which Santiago had conducted at headquarters continued. He was seen to gesture; his voice in an unintelligible murmur carried only to Captain Torres.

Manuel Domingo turned, spoke for the first time since stepping into

the car. He was frightened, the terrible black sky threatened, he did not trust Santiago.

"Get me out of this," he said, "or else—"

"Quiet, you fool. This is routine. You've been accused."

"Who accuses me? Name him."

"Shut up and listen."

Manuel Domingo came to attention again. His chest heaved, chin lifted, then suddenly he bolted in an attempt to escape. Calmly Santiago fired from the hip.

Domingo seemed to be running on air, the weight of his body carried him forward, then his legs buckled and he plunged forward to sprawl on the desert floor. Moments later Santiago stood over him and fired another shot as the others closed in.

THE BLACK NIGHT enveloped the desolate scene as the cavalcade roared off toward the city. Santiago glanced at the clock on the dashboard and settled back. It was still early, the issue settled. The Mayor no longer had reason to be embarrassed.

As Santiago smiled to himself, Captain Torres turned and said, "Officially, we know now that Manuel Domingo was guilty of murdering Rosa Belmonte, but—"

"You don't think he killed the girl?"

"Do you?"

"No."

"Then why did he run?"

"I told him we couldn't protect him from the mob, that if he ran, I'd cover him and let him escape because I knew he was innocent."

"But you shot him down."

Santiago put a cigarette to his lips. "I had no alternative," he answered, flicking his lighter, and the cavalcade moved on toward the lights of the city.

In the early morning the body of the murderer Manuel Domingo, naked but for a white sheet that covered the lower half of his body, lay on a long table beneath a tree in a small plaza near the center of the city for all to see and take warning. Flies came with the heat; the light brought crowds.

All through the day the people of the city filed past the dead man and at dusk he was taken away, mourned by none.

Here, the matter would have ended, interred along with Manuel Domingo, but for Detective Fiala who knew one thing beyond doubt: Domingo hadn't killed the girl. With the murderer still at large, on his own time, Fiala conducted an investigation which quickly proved fruitful. That done, he appeared at the Municipal building, asked to see Mayor Quevedo and was informed that he was at lunch, dining with several men of importance.

Obtaining the name of the restaurant, Fiala went there, seated himself at a table next to Quevedo's party, bowed and, in a

voice soft enough to elude the ears of the others, said, "If I may have a word. It's a matter of grave importance which concerns you."

Such was his manner that Quevedo quickly nodded. When he and his companions finished dining, he contrived an excuse for remaining behind and sat down at Fiala's table.

"Now," he said with some anxiety, "what is this matter of importance which concerns me?"

"I'm afraid it's much too important to discuss here."

"In that case, we'll go to my office."

Fiala nodded and both of them arose and went out the door. A few minutes later they faced each other across Quevedo's ornate hand-carved desk. Quevedo offered a cigarette. Fiala refused it and presented his case, bluntly informing him that the Chief of Police had murdered Rosa Belmonte.

"A very serious charge," Quevedo said, turning pale. "But can you prove it?"

Fiala nodded and described how he'd gone to see Luis Espina, the fibre-gatherer who'd discovered the body of the dead girl. With a series of tactful questions he'd finally gotten the old man to admit that he'd actually witnessed the murder.

"If this is true," Quevedo put in, "why didn't Espina come forward and say so?"

"He couldn't," Fiala replied,

"because at the time of the murder he didn't recognize Santiago. All he knew was that the killer drove off in a blue and white Cadillac. That was significant. I continued to question him and he produced a vivid description of the driver, but not his identity. That came later when I pressed him.

"He then admitted that he'd watched the spectacle last night. The lights drew him from his house, and he saw Santiago gun down Manuel Domingo. That's when he recognized him as the murderer of Rosa Belmonte."

Quevedo nodded and said, "The word of a confused old man. His story won't hold water. Besides Domingo admitted his guilt at the scene of the crime by attempting to escape."

"Admitted his guilt?" Fiala smiled and shook his head. "That was the one fact I knew from the beginning, that he wasn't guilty. You see, Manuel Domingo couldn't have killed Rosa Belmonte, he wasn't in the city that day. I know. I trailed him to San Rafael with the expectation of catching him in one of his activities, dealing in marijuana.

"He remained at a bar in San Rafael till evening, and his contact never appeared. Perhaps he knew I'd trailed him. At any rate, the deal didn't come off. At nine he headed back to the city. By that time Rosa Belmonte was dead."

At this point Quevedo was con-

vinced of the truth of Fiala's charge, but one thing was unclear. "Why did Santiago pick Domingo for a victim?" he wanted to know.

Fiala smiled again and clarified the point. "One," he said, holding up a finger. "Domingo's reputation was bad; the charge appeared to suit his character. Two: Santiago and Domingo were partners. Domingo controlled the red light district, with the help of Santiago. They quarreled over money. Santiago claimed that Domingo was holding out on him. He probably was, so Santiago found it doubly convenient to eliminate him."

Quevedo nodded. It was all clear now, too clear. He frowned and his face paled. If revealed, Santiago's terrible act would threaten his own position. Frightened, his eyes met Fiala's.

The detective had read his thoughts, understood his predicament and said, "Of course, Santiago should be brought to justice, but to arrest him would prove most embarrassing to you."

Badly shaken, Quevedo nodded, but he was still alert. Fiala's statement implied more than it said.

"What do you suggest?" Quevedo asked.

Fiala moistened his lower lip with his tongue. "Speak to Santiago," he answered. "Give him the facts."

"And if he denies them?"

"If he does, tell him he'll be

placed under arrest. After what has taken place—" Here Fiala shrugged. "You can not guarantee his safety from the mob. I think he'll understand."

"Understand what?"

"Call him and see."

Quevedo glanced at the phone and hesitated, giving Fiala the opportunity to rise from his chair. "I'm going for coffee. I'll be back," he said and left Quevedo to deliver his terrible message.

Ten-minutes later he returned to the Mayor's office. Quevedo was still troubled. He said nothing. Fiala sat and reached for his cigarettes. At that moment the phone rang. Quevedo picked up the instrument, listened briefly and placed it back on its cradle.

"Santiago just shot himself," he announced.

Having foreseen this, Fiala merely shrugged and said, "But, of course. He had no alternative."

At this point, Quevedo saw Fiala in a new light. The fellow was devilishly clever and had saved him from his enemies. "I am in your debt," he said.

"Not at all," replied Fiala.

"Ah, but I am," Quevedo insisted. "Besides, I have no Police Chief now. Would you consider the office?"

Fiala grinned and, to the consternation of Quevedo, shook his head. "But why not?" said Quevedo. "I don't understand. Think of what it means to be Chief of Police."

"In this city," Fiala replied, it means to have much power, and power corrupts."

"It would corrupt you?" Quevedo asked.

"I am of flesh and blood. Perhaps it might, but I doubt it."

"Then why refuse?"

"Because the job doesn't interest me. It's as simple as that," Fiala answered and rose from his chair to light a cigarette. With that, he walked to the door.

Still puzzled, Quevedo watched him, then said, "But you must want something. What do I owe you?"

His hand on the doorknob, Fiala turned. "Nothing," he answered. "Just be more careful when you pick the new Chief of Police."

THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring a new MIKE SHAYNE every month

THE NAMELESS CLUE

by HELEN McCLOY

Not only was Benda a vicious racketeer posing as a reputable business man . . . he had the police under his thumb. And that called for a special kind of murder probe.

ALEC NORTON was startled. He could only incredulously echo his chief's words. "You mean you want me to sleep in a room where murder has just been committed?"

"Why not?" Dave Tanner, feature editor of the Syndicated Press, stood in his office his back to a window overlooking the harbor. His head was dark against the pale winter sky. A smile tugged one corner of his hard mouth. "Don't tell me you're afraid of ghosts."

Norton grinned wryly as he stared at Tanner. "Fun's fun, chief, but I'm no Mike Shayne. I'm a feature writer and—"

"You won't be a feature writer for long unless you learn to take

assignments without squawking!" snapped Tanner. "Listen, Alec, this may be a big story—bigger than you think. There's been too many unsolved murders in Pearson City lately."

"Okay, I'm a wage slave," Alec Norton said, grumbling. "Let's have the dope."

"Diana Clark was murdered in a suite at the Hotel Westmore in Pearson City. There were signs of a violent struggle—chairs overturned, blood on the rug, blood in the bathtub where the murderer appears to have washed his hands. But there were no clues—absolutely no clues of any kind." Dave Tanner paused.

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A THRILLING SUSPENSE NOVELET



Norton said slowly and distinctly, "Nerts!"

"That's what I think. Where there's been a struggle there are bound to be clues. But the police have dropped the case. I want you to go to Pearson City and find out why. Take the same plane Diana Clark took and get there at the same time. Go to the same hotel and occupy the same suite. Eleven hundred and five."

"Will the hotel let someone have it so soon after the crime?"

"Why not? The police have finished with it. When a murder is committed in a hotel, the scene of the crime is always rented sooner or later. The number of the suite hasn't been published in any newspaper. To the hotel people, you'll just be an innocent transient who happens to ask for that particular suite. Once inside, keep your eyes open!"

"For what?" Norton was frankly skeptical. "The police will have gone over every square inch of the place with a fine-tooth comb. The hotel people will have scoured and vacuumed it. Ten to one, it's been redecorated!"

"I'm betting on the chance they may have overlooked something," said Tanner. "Interview the bellboy and chambermaid who waited on Clark. Study the topography of the suite. Try to imagine you're going to be murdered yourself the night you arrive between eleven p.m. and one a.m."

Alec Norton smirked. "Cheerful way to spend an evening! Hey," he said, "suppose the murderer should return to the scene of the crime!"

Tanner's eyes gleamed. He spoke softly. "That is exactly what I'm hoping for. After all, the murderer is still at large. And the key to the suite is still missing."

A COUPLE OF hours later, on the plane, Alec Norton refreshed his memory of the Clark case by reading teletype flimsies—spot news stories about the crime sent out by the *Pearson City Star*, a member of the Syndicated Press.

Diana Clark was a promising young actress living in New York. Two weeks ago she had gone to the Texan border town of Pearson City. Daniel Forbes, her divorced husband, lived there. So did the firm of lawyers who had got her the divorce, Kimball and Stacy. She reached Pearson City at nine p.m. and went straight to the Hotel Westmore. She telephoned the junior partner of her law firm, Martin Stacy, and asked him to call at her hotel that evening.

At the time of her divorce Forbes had promised to pay her a lump sum in lieu of further alimony if she re-married. According to Stacy, Diana Clark told him she was planning to remarry and she wanted him to ask Forbes for the lump sum. Stacy replied that it would bankrupt Forbes who had

just sunk all his money in a real estate venture.

Stacy said he left her hotel suite at nine forty-five p.m. She was in good health and spirits, but still determined to get the money from Forbes. No one saw Stacy leave. No other visitor inquired for Diana Clark that evening.

Next morning she was found dead in her suite with a bullet from a .22 calibre Colt revolver in her brain. According to the medical examiner, she was shot between eleven p.m. and one a.m. Her door was locked and the key was missing. So was the gun.

When Norton finished reading, his hasty surmise was that either Forbes or Stacy had killed Diana Clark. Forbes had a motive and Stacy an opportunity. Find a motive for Martin Stacy or an opportunity for Daniel Forbes and the case would be solved.

Arriving in Pearson City, Alec Norton found the Hotel Westmore to be one of the older hotels in town. Norton's first impression of the lobby was gloomy, Victorian dignity—black walnut and red plush, a black and white tiled floor and Persian rugs.

He studied the night clerk as a man measures an adversary. "I'd like the suite I had the last time I was here."

"Certainly, sir." The clerk was young and limp with a tired smile. "Do you recall the room number?"

"It was eleven-o-five."



The clerk's smile vanished. "That suite is taken."

Norton's glance went to a chart of guest names and room numbers hanging on the wall behind the clerk. Opposite the number 1105 stood one word: *Unoccupied*.

The clerk's glance followed Norton's. "We have better rooms vacant now," he protested. "Larger and more comfortable, and at the same rate."

Norton leaned on the desk, holding the clerk's eyes with his. "Suppose you tell me the real reason why you don't want me to have that suite," he said. "There might be a story in it."

"Story—what do you mean?"

"I'm with the Syndicated Press."

A newspaper feature service. Either I get the story—or I get the suite."

It was blackmail and the clerk knew it. "There is no story," he said tremulously. "Front! Show this gentleman to eleven-o-five."

Norton followed a bellhop across the lobby to the elevator. He could feel eyes on his back. He wished it had not been necessary to announce the number of his suite quite so publicly.

The corridor on the eleventh floor was dimly lighted by electric globes at intervals of thirty feet. A thick, crimson carpet muffled every footfall. At the end of the corridor Norton noticed a door marked: *Fire Stairs*. It was a neat setup for a murder trap.

The bellhop unlocked a white door numbered, 1105. The room was dark but a neon sign flashed and faded beyond the window. A few snowflakes sifted down through the theatrical red glow, languid as falling feathers. Hastily the bellhop switched on a ceiling light. The room looked normal and even commonplace.

Norton played the part of a curious tourist. "Tell me something," he said. "Is there anything wrong with this room?"

"N-no." The bellhop dropped his eyes.

"Afraid you'll lose your job if you talk?"

The bellhop raised his eyes. "Listen, mister. If you want my ad-

vice, pack up and take the next plane back to New York."

"Were you on duty here two weeks ago?"

The bellhop hesitated. Then, "I'm not talking. But I wouldn't spend a night in here for a million bucks!"

He was in a hurry to get out of the room. Norton gave him a fifty-cent tip and let him go.

Alone, Norton examined the doors. There were three—one leading to a bathroom, one to the hall and the one to the room next door was immovable—locked or bolted on the other side. He locked the hall door and put the key with his watch on the bedside table. It was just a quarter of nine.

Norton glanced into the bathroom. He remembered what Dave Tanner had told him—*Blood in the bathtub where the murderer appears to have washed his hands*. It seemed clean now, but Norton decided against a bath. He crawled into bed and switched off the light.

In the darkness he could see the crimson reflection of the neon sign on the wall opposite the window. It winked steadily as a metronome—on, off—on, off. In less than five minutes, he was asleep.

Norton never knew just what woke him. Yet suddenly he was wide awake. There was no sound and apparently no movement in the room but the noiseless pulsation of the red light on the wall.

He lay still, listening to the si-

lence, watching the light. Somewhere in the city a big clock sounded twelve solemn notes—midnight. *According to the medical examiner she was shot between eleven p.m. and one a.m.*

Alec Norton heard a faint sound. It was inside the room. He let his eyelids droop and breathed heavily, feigning sleep. The sound was coming nearer. A large shadow fell across the illuminated wall, distorted and indefinable.

Cautiously, Norton tensed his muscles, ready to jump. The bed-springs betrayed him with a creak. The shadow vanished. Someone had moved beyond the range of the light from the window.

Abandoning caution, Norton leapt out of bed and groped for the light switch. Before he could snap it on, a stinging blow caught him in the ribs. He lashed out blindly with his right.

There was a thick, squashy crack of fist on flesh. Something hard grazed his knuckles. He put everything he had into the next blow and aimed down where the stomach ought to be. Rough cloth rasped his fist. There was a grunt, curiously inarticulate, like an animal in pain. Something heavy shook the floor as it dropped.

Norton waited a moment, on guard. Nothing happened. Again he groped for the light switch. This time he snapped it on.

The blue rug had been rolled up and stacked in one corner of the

room. On the bare floor boards a man lay face down. He had a short powerful body. Norton turned him over and discovered a round, lumpy face with narrow slanting eyes.

There was a slight bulge under the left armpit. It proved to be a shoulder holster and Alec promptly removed the gun. A professional gunman would not have killed Diana Clark with a weapon of such small calibre as a .22. Nor would he choose a respectable hotel as the scene for a killing when it would be so much safer to take his victim for a one-way ride on a lonely country road.

The man's eyelids fluttered. He opened his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" Norton asked.

The man made no reply. His eyes were dazed. His lips were bruised and swollen where Norton had hit him.

"Did you kill Diana Clark?"

Norton expected an indignant denial, but there was no response at all.

"Snap out of it or I'll turn you over to the police!" The silence was getting Norton's nerves.

The man opened his mouth, but no words came. Only that curious, animal grunting Norton had heard during their fight.

The man's forefinger pointed toward his mouth. North realized the man was a mute. For a moment pity made Alec Norton for-

get everything else. A moment was all the man needed. His right shoulder rose and a blinding blow crashed against Norton's jaw. Darkness was spangled with a rain of stars. Then there was only darkness . . .

ALEC NORTON seemed to be swimming through heavy seas. He could hear the pounding of the surf. His eyelids were made of lead. He was lying on the floor. The neon sign was turned off. A gray dawn lay beyond the window, but even that wan light seared his raw eyeballs. The pounding of the surf was the throbbing of his own pulse in his ears.

Gingerly, his fingertips explored his jaw. It was swollen and tender but not broken.

He got to his feet slowly. He looked about the room. No one else was there. The rug was still rolled and stacked in a corner. The furniture had been moved out from the walls as if the intruder had been searching the floor for some small object that might have lodged under the rug or between wall and furniture.

Nothing else was disturbed. His belongings were ranged on the bureau just as he had left them. Bedclothes and mattress were intact. The cushions of the upholstered chairs were not even turned over.

Norton crossed the room and looked into the bathroom. Nothing disarranged. He tried the door into

the hall. It was still locked. He tried the door that communicated with the next room. Also locked. The uninvited guest must have used a skeleton key—or the key that had been missing ever since the murder.

Norton picked up the phone. "Will you send some black coffee to eleven-o-five as soon as the restaurant opens? And a morning paper—the *Star*."

He went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. The impact made him wince, but he forced his aching head under the stream of cold water with the rest of his body.

When he climbed out a few minutes later a blast of cold air from the open window in the next room shivered his wet body. He slammed the door, grabbed a rough towel and rubbed himself vigorously. A glow of warmth ran through his veins. He felt almost human again as he wrapped himself in a flannel dressing-gown and slid his feet into leather bedroom slippers. Hand on the doorknob, he paused.

There was a sound of movement in the room beyond. Was it the bellhop with coffee or the uninvited guest again? He balled his right hand and threw the door open with his left.

Abruptly he was conscious of bare shins and damp hair. A girl knelt in the middle of the room examining the floor.

"Oh." She rose. "I'm sorry. I

must've mistaken your room for mine." Her startled eyes were a deeper brown than her hair. There was character in the firm line of her chin, tenderness in the soft curve of her mouth.

Norton appreciated her, but his eyes remained wary. "Looking for something?"

"No. I just dropped my—my handkerchief."

He was sure she was lying. There was no handkerchief in her hand. Yet she didn't look like a common sneak thief. Everything she wore was the best of its kind—dark brown to match her eyes except for a tweed coat that matched the light, tawny brown of her hair. She thrust one hand in a pocket of the coat and drew out a key with a hotel tag.

"This is my own key," she said. "It must fit your lock as well as mine." His unsmiling stare kindled a flush in her cheeks. "You don't believe me!"

"No." There was a ripple of amusement around his mouth.

"You're insulting!" She was through the hall door in a flash. It slammed behind her.

Norton's ripple became a grin. But only for a moment. His face was sober enough as he began to dress. In less than twenty-four hours two people had searched for something in this room. And both had searched the floor.

As soon as he was dressed, Norton went down on his hands



and knees. Now that the rug was rolled aside, he could see a dark, irregular stain in the middle of the floor boards. It was streaky where a half-hearted attempt had been made to remove it with some solvent. But nothing else about the floor boards suggested murder. He was still studying them when someone tapped on the door.

"Coffee, sir!"

Norton scrambled to his feet. A bellhop came in with a tray balanced on one hand and set it down with a flourish. Then he pulled a

folded newspaper from his pocket and laid it beside the tray. His blue eyes were bright as his brass buttons. He had sandy hair that curled close to his head. Norton fished a half-dollar out of his pocket and tossed it to him.

The bellhop missed the catch. The coin rang as it hit the floor and rolled away. The bellhop went down on his knees and scanned the floor boards Indian fashion, eyes level with the surface.

"Under the radiator," he said. He slid a hand back of the valve that connected with the pipe from the furnace. "Say, this ain't the half-dollar!" The bellhop held out his hand, palm up.

A disc lay there, the size and the thickness of a half-dollar; round, except for two slots opposite each other shaped like tiny keyholes; black, with a smooth, hard-rolled finish. There were no fingerprints on it, only smudges.

Even in Norton's strong fingers it wouldn't bend. It weighed less than a half-dollar. When he dropped it on the table it rang faintly as it spun and settled. But it was not the shrill resonance of metal.

"What it it?"

"I don't know," said Norton. "Never mind the half-dollar. Here's something better."

"Five bucks!" The bellhop eyed the bill Norton was peeling from his roll.

"That's not for bringing breakfast. That's for answering questions."

"But I haven't answered any questions."

"No. But you're going to." Norton smiled. "What's your name?"

"Gus—Gus Williams."

"Were you on duty here when Diana Clark was murdered?"

The bellhop's face changed. "Are you a cop?"

"No."

"Then I ain't talking."

Norton held up the black disc between thumb and forefinger. "Ever see anything like this before?"

"No." Gus rubbed his curly head. "You think maybe it's a clue of some kind?"

"It might be."

"Then I don't want anything to do with it!" Gus said, and backed away.

"I know how you feel," said Norton. "The killer is still at large. I believe he was in this room last night."

"Last night?" A constellation of freckles stood out vividly as Gus' face whitened. "It couldn't be."

"Why not?"

"They got him last night."

"The devil they did!" Norton's hand went to his swollen jaw. "What time?"

"Six p.m. But they only gave it to the papers this morning."

Norton's eyes searched the bellhop's face. "If the murderer is in

jail why are you still afraid to talk?"

"Listen, mister. I'm no hero. This case is dynamite. I don't want to be mixed up in it. If you know what's good for you, believe me, you'll leave it alone! I guess I've earned that five bucks by telling you so!"

He edged out the door. Norton turned to the morning paper.

STACY ARRESTED FOR
CLARK MURDER

Pearson City, Tuesday, Jan. 17
—Martin Stacy, junior partner in the law firm of Kimball and Stacy, was arrested last night for the first degree murder of Diana Clark, divorced wife of Daniel Forbes of Wickford, nearby suburb. The arrest was announced by police shortly after midnight just as a writ of habeas corpus for the production of Martin Stacy was issued to Clement Kimball, probable candidate for the U. S. Senate at next year's election, who is also Stacy's senior partner and legal representative. Mr. Kimball told reporters that Stacy was held incommunicado by police without a warrant for three hours prior to his formal arrest in violation of his constitutional rights.

"Martin is incapable of murder," added Mr. Kimball. "He's been like an adopted son to my wife and myself. We have no children of our own and Martin came

to the firm direct from his graduating class at law school five years ago."

Asked why there was a bruise under Stacy's right eye when he appeared in court, a police inspector said: "He fell downstairs. Can you see the boys pulling any rough stuff on a guy who's a lawyer?"

Alec Norton could. He'd been a police reporter and he knew that prisoners don't fall downstairs unless they are pushed.

He let his coffee grow cold as he studied the black disc once more. Could it have been dropped by the intruder during the struggle last night? Then why did the intruder roll back the rug prior to the struggle? Both man and girl had been looking for something on the floor.

The disc was the sort of thing you would expect to find on the floor if it were lost—a round, flat object that would drop and roll out of sight like a coin. It had been hidden behind the radiator valve, the one piece of furniture that could not be moved out from the wall during an ordinary search of the room. The disc could easily have lain there for two weeks, unnoticed by anybody.

But would they have been wiser if they had found the black disc? What was it used for? What was it called? A clue without name or function was not much of a clue! It must be evidence—but evidence of what?

Whistling tunelessly, Norton slipped the nameless clue into his wallet and reached for his hat. In the long, dim corridor he passed a linen closet. A chambermaid was sorting clean towels and sheets.

"Hello! What's your name?"

"Marie Chester."

Norton leaned against the door of the linen closet. "I'm in Eleven-O-five. Are you the maid for that room?"

"Yes." Her eyelids dropped when she heard the number. She went on sorting linen. Black hair framed her pale face, thin and worn as a profile on an old coin. It was a mature, intelligent face with a discontented mouth.

"Do you dust behind the radiator?" asked Norton.

She paused and braced herself, one hand against a shelf. Her brows knotted, her narrow lips hardened. She had a temper. "If you have any complaints, sir—"

"Oh no," said Norton. "But I found something behind the radiator this morning. I thought it might have been dropped by a maid." He fished the black disc out of his wallet. "Is this yours?"

There was no gleam of recognition in her eyes. "I don't even know what it is," she said carefully. "It certainly doesn't look valuable."

"No." He tossed the disc into the air and caught it with one hand. "Was it there the last time

you dusted behind the radiator?"

His casual tone caught her off guard. "I haven't dusted behind the radiator since—" She stopped short.

"Since when?" he prompted gently.

"So you're a cop! I might have known!" Naked fear looked out of her eyes. The work-roughened hand on the shelf began to tremble. Even her voice shook. "Two weeks ago I tried to tell the police my story. They wouldn't even listen. If there'd been a woman detective working on the case, she'd have listened. But nobody can tell men anything! The reporters listened, but they didn't print a word I said."

"I suppose there were no women reporters either?" said Norton with a half smile.

"If there were they wrote all their stuff in the office. They never came here. And the men weren't interested in me. If I'd been ten years younger with bleached hair and a come-hither eye—But perhaps it's just as well I'm not."

"Why?"

"That room has been vacant ever since the cops cleared out. But yesterday morning when I went in there the furniture was all moved around and the rug rolled back. Do you think I'd stop to dust behind radiators in a place like that? It hasn't had a real dusting since the morning before the murder. The housekeeper won't go in

there at all and I wouldn't myself without the bathmaid!"

"Was there a black disc behind the radiator when you dusted there the morning before the murder?"

"No!" She was almost pleading. "Now will you leave me alone?"

Norton studied the mature, intelligent face. "What are you afraid of?"

"I'm afraid of him."

"Him?"

Her answer came in a whisper. "Leo Benda."

"Who's that?"

"I've said too much already." Her thin lips clamped together. "Please, let me alone!"

OUTDOORS, winter sunshine was pale and thin as lemonade. Norton picked his way through drifts of dingy city snow to the offices of the *Pearson City Star*. The newspaper's morgue was a long, light airy room filled with filing cabinets. Three men sat at a table clipping stories from yesterday's paper.

"Syndicated Press," announced Norton. "Got a file on Diana Clark?"

One man thought the case was too recent. But another intervened, "Sure there's a file. I just sent it up to the city room. If you'll wait a while you can have it when it comes back."

After twenty minutes, a copy



boy trotted in carrying a manila envelope stuffed with newspaper clippings. Norton dumped them out on the table and rearranged them in chronological order.

It was the cuts illustrating the various stories that interested him. One picture was obviously a snapshot enlarged for newspaper use. It showed a boy and girl arm in arm. The girl was hatless, short hair blowing in the wind. Her eyes were darker than her hair. There was character in the firm line of her chin, tenderness in the soft curve of her mouth. He looked at the caption.

Last Man To See Diana Clark Alive—Martin Stacy with his sister, Jean, at the opening of the Melbrook County sheep dog trials.

Alec turned to other clippings: *The police are leaving no stone unturned . . . Miss Clark's death is a great loss to the American stage and motion pictures . . .*

One item was not clipped from a newspaper. It was a strip of gallery proof.

MYSTERY WOMAN IN CLARK CASE

Pearson City, Monday, Jan. 9—Marie Chester, chambermaid at the hotel where Diana Clark was murdered, told reporters today that police are making a big mistake in assuming that the murderer is a man.

"A woman killed Miss Clark," insisted Miss Chester. "I was substituting for the night maid on the night of the murder and I saw a woman leave Miss Clark's suite shortly after midnight. She went down the corridor and passed through the door leading to the fire stairs. I told the police but they wouldn't pay any attention to me. I couldn't see the woman's face but she was wearing a long, brown coat."

On the wide margin of the gallery proof four words had been rubber-stamped in red ink: **KILLED IN FIRST EDITION.**

Norton showed it to one of the men at the table. "How come?"

The man grinned irreverently. "The big boss himself phoned down to the printer just as we

were going to press and said to kill the story."

"Why?" asked Norton.

"The police psychiatrist says Marie Chester is an unreliable witness subject to hallucinations, sex antagonism and spots before the eyes. Rumor says the yarn was killed because Mr. Leo Benda doesn't like to read about anything that worries him when he opens his morning newspaper."

"Who is this Leo Benda anyway?"

The man stared. "People around here never have to ask. I'm surprised New York hasn't heard of him. He owns Pearson City lock, stock and barrel. Everything from slot machines and clip joints to bucket shops and poultry markets."

"And the police department?"

The *Star* man laughed and winked. "I wouldn't know about that."

Norton's next stop was the district attorney's office. His press card from the New York police department gained him admittance to the property clerk.

Diana Clark's belongings were spread out on a table; one coat, red velveteen with a fox collar; two dresses, day and evening; one hat, also red velveteen; some flimsy rayon underthings and shabby toilet articles. No wonder she had wanted that lump sum from Forbes! She must have been living through one of those finan-

cial crises that come so often to stage people.

The sun had set when Alec Norton reached the sprawling white frame house in the suburbs where Jean Stacy had been living with her brother Martin. A golden afterglow lingered in the west as Norton crossed a windswept terrace and pressed the doorbell. The door was opened by a maid in a spotless white apron.

"Please tell Miss Stacy I'd like to speak to her about her brother. It's important. I think I can help him. My name is Alec Norton."

"Yes sir!" A tremulous smile on the maid's face told Norton that Martin Stacy was well-liked by his household.

Norton waited in a broad hall furnished like a living room, shadowy in the early winter twilight. Jean Stacy came down the wide stairs alone.

"Did Marty send you?" She peered through the shadows. "Oh!" She had recognized Norton. Her lips grew as firm as her chin. "What are you doing here?"

Norton produced his New York press card.

Her anger turned to scorn. "I thought women did the sob stuff. Or do they just use rubber-stamps?"

"Oh, I get more than space rates," said Norton, lightly. "And I'm not here for sob stuff. I really can help you—if you'll let me."

"What's Marty to you?" Her



voice shook with repressed feeling.

"Nothing."

"Then you're just a reporter looking for a story?"

"Say a trouble-shooter."

"What's the trouble in Pearson City?"

"Too many unsolved murders lately. My chief suggested I look into it. So I've been working on

the latest—the murder of Diana Clark."

"But—" Jean's lips lost their firmness. "The case is solved now. I mean, they think it is. They think Marty did it."

"They?"

"The police."

"I wonder if they really do?" said Norton. "They seem to be suppressing the testimony of a chambermaid who saw a woman leave Clark's suite the night of the murder. Your brother wasn't arrested until I reached Pearson City. There were plenty of people in the lobby last night when I asked for Clark's suite. I said I was with the Syndicated Press.

"Someone in the lobby crowd may have reported my interest in the case to the police. They may have decided it was time to provide press and public with a scapegoat: So your brother was arrested."

Her face twitched. "You mean they're just going to—to railroad him?"

"They're going to try."

"Oh, God!" The exclamation was a prayer. "As long as they believed him guilty, all we had to do was to prove him innocent. But if they don't care whether he's guilty or not, what can be done?"

"Appeal to public opinion. If the Syndicated Press publicized evidence of his innocence throughout the country the police here couldn't railroad him."

"You're right." Her expression changed. "I'm going to take you on trust!" she cried impulsively. "I have nobody in the world but Marty and Uncle Kim and Uncle Kim's too old to handle this."

"Uncle Kim?"

"Clement Kimball, Marty's senior partner. We call him uncle and we call his wife Aunt Margaret. Our real parents died when we were in our teens. What can I do?"

"First, answer some questions," he said. "What were you looking for early this morning when I discovered you in Diana Clark's suite?"

"The papers said there were signs of a struggle when the body was found and the rug was rolled back as if the murderer had searched the floor for something after the murder. Little things do come loose in a struggle—buttons, ear-rings, things like that.

"I hoped there might be something the police had overlooked, some little thing that would point to the real murderer and clear Marty. I never dreamed the room would be rented to anyone else so soon after the murder. So I bribed the night chambermaid to let me use her passkey."

"That was taking a big risk."

Her eyes looked enormous as she went on, speaking rapidly: "I was frantic. The police took Marty away yesterday evening at nine o'clock. They wouldn't let me or Uncle Kim see him all night long.

We knew they must be giving him a third degree, because they had no warrant for his arrest. I just couldn't sit still and think about it. I had to do something. But, of course, it was silly to do what I did. The police don't overlook things."

"They did this time." Norton brought out the black disc.

Jean Stacy was puzzled. She turned it over with one long, pink varnished nail as it lay on the palm of his hand. "What is it?"

"I don't know. I was hoping you could tell me. I found it on the floor in Clark's suite behind the radiator. The chambermaid said it wasn't there before the murder. Someone else besides you tried to search the suite last night—a man who looked like a crook. He paid particular attention to the floor.

"I couldn't question him because he was a mute. He outwitted me and got away, but he may have been looking for this."

"Then we've got to find out what it is!"

"We can begin by finding out what it's made of. Do you know any industrial chemists?"

"There's one on Water Street!" Jean sprang to her feet, eyes shining. "I'll drive you back to town. Just wait till I get my coat."

It was an exhilarating drive in a little car open to the burning chill of the January evening. Jean didn't seem to feel the cold in her fleecy tweed coat. Her light brown

head was bare to the wind. Her shapely hands were ungloved as they rested on the wheel. A nice girl, thought Norton.

The chemist received them in a musty little anteroom. He seemed more anxious to get home to his dinner than to collect a fee for analysis. He took the black disc to a strong light and studied it under a magnifying glass. "Good Lord! You don't want me to analyze this, do you?"

"Why not?"

"It's nothing but cardboard!"

"Are you sure?" cried Alec. "It looks harder and smoother than cardboard!"

"Ordinary pasteboard is soft, pulpy stuff," said the chemist. "But there are better grades of cardboard almost as hard as vulcanite. This is one of them. Any paper manufacturer can tell you which. I don't know the commercial name for it."

"And the black color?" asked Norton.

"Some dye, probably tar."

"Can you tell us what purpose this disc is used for?" Jean asked.

The chemist looked at her and thawed a little. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but I can't. It looks as if it were a small part of some larger object. By itself, it's hard to identify. If you saw the inside of a golf ball without the rest of the ball you wouldn't be likely to recognize it. People always identify a part by its relation to the whole."

"Then this disc may be part of something we see every day of our lives?"

"Quite possibly."

ALEC NORTON and Jean went outside. They had left the street in twilight; they returned to find it night. Jean slid under the steering wheel. Norton stood on the sidewalk. She said, "What now?"

"I'd like to meet the other people involved in this case—your brother and his lawyer, and Diana Clark's divorced husband, Daniel Forbes. Could it be managed?"

"Of course. Uncle Kim will do everything he can to help us. You can meet him at his office tomorrow morning at ten."

"Okay." Norton smiled down at her. "Don't give up hope until we see how Forbes reacts to the black disc!"

She returned the smile with steady lips. "Don't worry about me. I'm no quitter. Can I drop you anywhere?"

Norton's eyes were on the rear-view mirror. He saw a man standing just behind him. The face was in shadow, but there was something unpleasantly familiar about the short, heavy body wrapped in an overcoat too broad across the shoulders and too narrow at the waist. Norton's one idea was to get Jean out of the way.

"No, thanks," he said. "I want to explore the city on foot."

"All right." Her car moved for-

ward. The light from a street lamp turned her light brown hair to bronze and touched the chromium fixtures of the car with the shine of silver. Then darkness swallowed both.

Norton started to turn around. Something hard and round prodded his back just over the kidneys. A heavy hand pushed him toward a car parked at the curb. It was all done quietly, neatly, professionally.

Norton had read and written about things like this. But nothing of the sort had ever happened to him before. He looked at the dark street bright with lights, mobile with men and women who hurried about their business unaware of his plight. He wondered if he would ever see all this again.

The car was sleek and long and black. The man with the gun prodded Norton inside and pulled the door shut. It wasn't like a car. It was more like a large taxi with its two extra seats.

The car did not move. The man with the gun shoved Norton into one of the little seats and sat himself in the other. He was the mute whom Norton had fought with in his hotel room. He didn't bother to look at Norton.

Facing them both, on the back seat, was a man with a puffy, pasty face; white hair, brows and lashes. His dull, round black eyes were like two raisins set in floury white dough. "What is your inter-

est in the Diana Clark case?" he asked softly.

"Nothing personal." Norton was a little surprised at the firmness of his own voice. "I'm a reporter for the Syndicated Press doing a modern crime series and it's one of the crimes."

"Is that the only reason you insisted on occupying suite eleven-o-five at the Hotel Westmore last night?"

"The only reason."

Before Norton could go on, a voice came from outside. "What do you think this is? A parking lot? You've been here thirty-five minutes if you've been here a second! Don't you know nobody can park on Water Street longer than twenty minutes?"

The man on the back seat lowered the window. A big policeman stood just outside. "Were you speaking to me?" said the man on the back seat.

"Oh—" Norton had never seen a blustering cop so swiftly deflated. "I sure am very sorry, Mr. Benda."

"You should've recognized my license plates."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Benda. I'm sorry." The cop saluted and retreated, yelling at a truck driver to cover his own confusion.

"So you are Leo Benda!" murmured Norton.

"Yes." A smile hovered around the colorless lips. "I am Leo Benda, thirty years ago a poor im-

migrant boy and now—" His gloved palm stroked the rich fur of the lap robe that lay across his knees. "And now one of the most successful business men in Pearson City."

Alec Norton suppressed a grin. *Business man* was good.

Benda went on, "Let that little incident be a lesson to you, Mr. Norton. The police have great respect for my judgment, and they know that I am entirely satisfied with their conduct of the Clark case."

"How did you know my name?"

"I took pains to find out all about you after Max reported your presence in the hotel last night. He had visited the suite the previous evening and found it vacant, so he was greatly surprised to encounter you when he returned last night to search the place more thoroughly."

A sardonic smile touched Benda's lips lightly. "My men have been watching you all day, Mr. Norton. I am disturbed by their reports. I hope that I may persuade you to leave Pearson City at once. If you are wise, you will forget that you ever heard the name Diana Clark."

"And if I don't?"

"It would be a pity—a great pity." The black eyes in the blanched face looked straight at Alec Norton. "I'm afraid you're not taking this seriously enough, Mr. Norton."

Norton knew that Benda was trying to frighten him. For that very reason, he no longer felt afraid. If Benda had wanted to kill him, he would have been a dead man by this time. Obviously Benda wanted him out of the way but Benda didn't want to kill him —for reasons of his own.

"Do you expect me to take this seriously?" he asked.

"You are a brave man." Benda's voice was softer than ever. "I am sorry. I had hoped you would have what Meredith calls the grain of common sense at the heart of all cowardice. I'll give you twenty-four hours to leave Pearson City, Mr. Norton. There's a New York plane tomorrow evening at five fifty-three. I sincerely hope you will decide to take it. Max!"

Benda turned to the mute and spoke in a foreign language Norton did not understand. Max opened the door and got out.

"Good night, Mr. Norton," said Benda.

Norton stepped down to the curb. Max climbed into the driver's seat and the car glided away smoothly. There was nothing left but the mark of tires in the snow to show Norton that he had not been dreaming.

At ten the next morning Norton entered the offices occupied by Kimball and Stacy, lawyers, on the twenty-first floor of Pearson City's tallest skyscraper.

A clerk showed him into a library walled with calf-bound tomes of the law. Already waiting there was a woman in a long, supple mink coat. She had dark hair turning gray and dark, tragic eyes. She waited restlessly, crossing and uncrossing slim ankles, playing with doeskin gloves, lighting one cigarette after another from a tortoise-shell case.

At last Clement Kimball appeared. He was a big, pleasant looking fellow in his early fifties, with shrewd eyes and a genial mouth. He was surprised to see the woman. "Why, Margaret!" he said.

She crushed her cigarette in an ashtray and crossed the room to his side. "Any news about Marty?" There was deep feeling in her voice.

"No." Kimball's answer came soberly.

"Isn't there anything I can do? Anything?"

"My dear, we're doing everything we can." Kimball's big hand lay gently on her shoulder. "Better go home. Get some rest."

"I'll go home. But I can't rest." She pulled her coat collar up around her face and left without another word.

Kimball turned to the reporter. "Mr. Norton? That was my wife. Forgive me for not introducing you but she's in a highly keyed-up state. She couldn't be more worried if she were Martin Stacy's

own mother. I am ready to leave with you right now."

"Let's see Stacy first."

Kimball drove Norton to the city prison where Martin was being held. An officer led them down a long, bleak corridor with the cool, earthy smell of a cellar. They entered a small room divided by a grille of steel.

On the other side of the grille stood the man Norton had seen in the newspaper picture with Jean. His tumbled hair made him look younger than he actually was. There was still a bruise under his right eye where he had "fallen downstairs." No wonder he looked dazed and uncertain of himself.

"I have just one question to ask you," said Norton. "Have you ever seen anything like this before?" He held out the black disc.

Martin strained his eyes through the grille. Police regulations forbade him to approach within ten

feet of it. "No," he said at last. "What is it?"

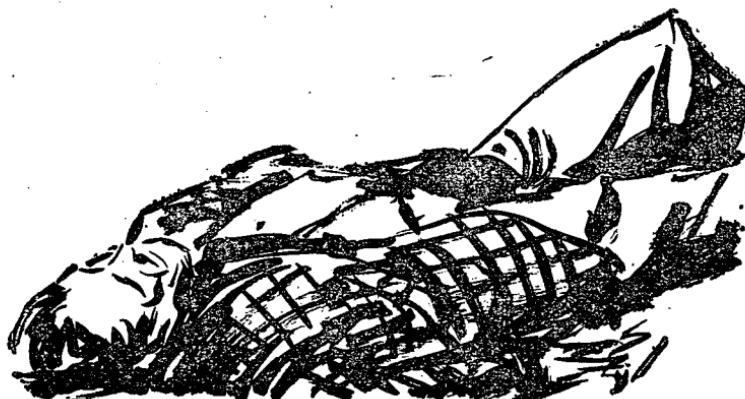
"Are you sure you saw nothing like this in Diana Clark's suite when you were there the night of the murder?"

"Quite sure. If it was there I didn't see it."

OUTSIDE AGAIN in the pale winter sunshine Kimball turned his car toward Wickford, the real estate project promoted by Diana Clark's divorced husband, Daniel Forbes.

Kimball drove in silence until Norton spoke. "Have you any idea who the man was Diana Clark planned to marry?"

Kimball frowned. "The police think it was Martin. They got to know each other when Martin and I handled her divorce from Forbes three years ago. The police claim that they were lovers—that Martin got tired of her and killed her



when she threatened suit for breach of promise. Of course it's nonsense. She was seven years older than Martin. He barely noticed her."

Wickford was a raw, new development. Tarred roads and asphalt sidewalks divided meadow and wasteland into checkerboard squares. There were only two houses—one finished, the other in the lathe and plaster stage.

Kimball halted his car before the finished house, a naked cube of white stucco without shrubbery or trees. A billboard proclaimed the office of Daniel Forbes, dealer in real estate.

Forbes himself answered the doorbell. He was young, but his face was set in a permanent frown of worry. He wore practical country clothes—shoe packs laced to the knee, an old pair of riding breeches and a mackinaw.

"Oh, it's you." His face fell when he saw Kimball. "I thought it was somebody come to buy a lot." He led the way into a roomy, plainly furnished office.

"How's business?" asked Norton after introductions had been made.

"Not so good." Forbes' grin twisted wryly. "I suppose that gives me a motive. I could never have paid the lump sum Diana wanted. And I haven't an alibi either. My wife and I were alone together all evening and a wife's testimony doesn't carry much

weight in a case like that. Everybody assumes she'll lie like a lady to save her husband's life. But I didn't do it." His grin faded. "Diana must have got her claws into some other poor guy and he shot her. I don't believe it was Marty Stacy."

"Why not?"

"He's just starting his career. Not enough money for Diana. He's too much like me. She wouldn't make the mistake of marrying a poor man the second time."

When Norton and Kimball rose to go, Forbes accompanied them to the front door. Two people were coming up on the porch—a little girl in a scarlet ski suit and a woman in a shabby old rabbit's fur coat. Both were pink-cheeked, wholesome and gay. Forbes introduced them with pride. "My wife and daughter."

The little girl had trouble curtseying in her ski suit. "My pants are too stiff," she explained solemnly.

Mrs. Forbes hailed Kimball with outstretched hands. The seam of one glove was mended with tiny, looped stitches. There was a neat darn in one stocking. Obviously she did all her own mending. She didn't seem to mind. But Norton thought: If she belonged to me I'd hate asking her to go without things so I could pay Diana Clark alimony. Forbes had a double motive: Clark was driving him to bankruptcy and he couldn't

face it with a second wife and a child to support . . .

Norton showed Forbes the black disc, casually, as if it were an afterthought instead of the purpose of this interview.

Forbes eyed it without apparent interest. "Doesn't mean a thing to me."

Norton looked up and met Mrs. Forbes' gaze. Her cheeks were a bloodless white now. Her eyes were glazed and stony, fixed on the black disc.

"You recognize this, Mrs. Forbes?" asked Norton.

"No." Her lips formed the word, but only the thinnest sound came from her throat. She tried again. "I've never seen anything like it before."

Norton knew she was not telling the truth.

AS THEY DROVE back to Pearson City, Norton gave Kimball a detailed account of the finding of the black disc.

"I'd like to hear the chambermaid's story from her own lips," said Kimball. "She's an important witness."

But when they stopped at the hotel, the management couldn't find Marie Chester. None of the staff had seen her for hours.

"She must be out at luncheon," suggested the housekeeper. "Try again after one o'clock."

Norton and Kimball lunched at the Stacy house with Jean. Coffee

was served in a long room with windows overlooking a winter landscape of pale sunshine and yesterday's shopworn snow.

They sat around a roaring fire of birch logs that gave the room color and light as well as warmth. Norton told them about his interview with Benda.

"Mr. Norton, you must take the next plane back to New York," said Jean.

Norton laughed and looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. "It's only two p.m. Benda gave me until five fifty-three. A lot can be done in nearly four hours, perhaps more than he realizes."

"I wish you would go." Jean's voice wavered. "I can't help feeling Benda is up to something. I saw him once in a night club. He was—" She searched for a word. "Evil."

"I've had the same feeling," said Kimball. "I've seen him in the Criminal Courts when his men were on the witness stand. He looks like a sadist, a man who enjoys cruelty for its own sake. Perhaps it would be better if you did go back to New York, Mister Norton.

"I can take the black disc to John Bates, the district attorney, and tell him the whole story. He'll jump at the chance of getting something on Benda. The governor appointed him for that very purpose and he has a staff of trained detectives who should be

able to identify the black disc more quickly than you could."

"When was Bates appointed?" asked Norton.

"Six months ago."

"And he hasn't got anything on Benda yet? He must be either bribed or incompetent! Our Mr. Benda doesn't hide his light under a bushel. I wouldn't trust a district attorney like that with the one concrete clue in the case."

"Then you're going on with this?" Jean asked.

"I'm not a quitter either!" Norton said. "You should be glad of that. Your brother is still in grave danger. The fact that Benda wants me to leave town proves that he is in the plot to protect the real murderer and railroad your brother. But I don't believe Benda will dare to try any tricks on me."

"After all, he's only a racketeer with police pull in a middle-sized Texas border town and I am an employee of a national organization. If I were killed or injured the Syndicated Press would make things so hot for him he'd have to stand trial. His battery of high-priced legal experts couldn't save him and he knows it. That's why he didn't dare lay a finger on me yesterday."

"Just what are you going to do?" Jean's voice was taut and brittle.

"Identify the black disc and trace it back to the murderer who

dropped it in Diana Clark's hotel suite."

Jean rose. "When do we start?" "We?"

"Sure. I'm in on this. Marty is my brother. My car's in front of the house."

Norton shook his head. "It's one thing to take chances for myself, but I'm not going to take chances for anyone else."

"You're not taking chances for me—I'm taking them for myself." Jean lifted that firm little chin. "And you said there was no danger to an employee of the Syndicated Press. Can't I be your temporary secretary or something?"

Norton admired her courage too much to refuse her. But Kimball shook his head, looking suddenly older and frailer. "I don't like this," he muttered. "I don't like it at all."

In the hall Norton consulted a classified telephone directory. From a dozen companies listed under *cardboard* he chose one at random—Elk River Mills Inc. As he climbed into the car, he gave Jean the address.

"Don't look now." Her eyes were on the rearview mirror. "But I believe there's another car following us. I'll make sure."

She took the next corner on two wheels and just skinned through a changing light. Norton glanced back over his shoulder. A black Cadillac had halted for the red light.

"That settled their hash!" cried Jean gleefully.

"I hope so."

The Elk River Mills had large offices in a modern building. Norton and Jean passed from secretary to secretary until they reached a "Mr. Grimes"—a small man with a big office all to himself.

He examined the edge of the black disc under a magnifying glass. Then he measured the thickness against a little steel gadget with adjustable jaws.

"Bindersboard," Grimes explained. "Most cardboard is made by pasting two or more sheets of paper pulp together. That's why it's called pasteboard. But bindersboard is made from a single sheet compressed at a pressure ranging from two hundred to four hundred tons. The finished board is almost two and a half times thinner than the original sheet. Density gives it exceptional stiffness and a smooth, hard-rolled finish like vulcanite. What is this funny little disc used for?"

Jean groaned aloud. Norton said: "We were hoping you could tell us! Can't you hazard a guess, now you've identified the grade of cardboard it's made of?"

"Good heavens, no! Bindersboard is used for dozens of things. You'd better see Stubbs. He's a jobber who buys all grades of cardboard from us and other mills in large quantities and then sells it in small lots to manufacturers of



cardboard objects. He might give you a list of his customers for bindersboard and you might find some company among them who manufactures discs like this. Stubbs' address is Ten Greenwood Lane."

The sun had disappeared. The city was colorless as a black and white print, stone buildings and lifeless trees dark against a pale, pearl sky. As the car started, Jean said quietly, "That man's here again."

Norton looked in the rearview mirror. The black Cadillac was just behind them. In the treacherous half-light it was impossible to see the driver.

"Better go home and let me take over," said Norton.

"Certainly not! Where is Greenwood Lane? It sounds rustic and quaint."

It was neither. It ran through the older part of the city, a dusty region of small factories and warehouses. It was hardly more than an alley, paved with cobblestones. On either side stood dingy, brick houses that must have been comfortable homes seventy years ago. Now they were used as warehouses by distributors of wholesale goods. Delivery wagons parked before yawning double doorways made progress difficult.

Again Norton looked in the rearview mirror. No sign of the big black car now. He frowned. He liked his enemies to be where he could see them.

No. 10 was hardly more than a shell. Every floor and partition had been torn away leaving the house one big storeroom four stories high. Every window had been bricked up. A single, bald electric bulb made little impression on the cavernous darkness within. Workmen were loading a truck with rolls of pasteboard. A foreman in overalls was comparing a bill of lading with a ledger. Norton explained their errand to him.

"Boss ain't here, but I guess there's no harm in letting you know what companies use bindersboard, seeing as old Grimes sent you." He flipped the pages of

his ledger. "Fletcher Bindery uses it for bookbinding—Mannering Body Company for the insides of sedan cars—Singleton Brothers for boxes—Ashley and Marx for cartridges—Diamond Pattern Company for templet board—Machinists Accessory Company for gaskets—Fur Workers Supply Company for furriers' accessories—"

"Hey, wait a minute!" Norton was scribbling frantically on the back of an old envelope, wondering what a templet was and what you did with a gasket. "Are there any firms connected with real estate or house construction that use bindersboard?"

"Blake and Brandt use it inside the walls and ceiling of a house."

"Did they build any of the new houses at Wickford?"

"Couldn't say offhand. But they probably did. They get all the fat construction jobs around here."

"Ever see anything like this before?" Norton dropped the black disc on the ledger.

"No." The foreman squinted as he held it up to the light. "Cut with a die. That's funny."

Norton's attention quickened. "What's funny about it?"

"Bindersboard is so tough it wears out the cutting edge of a die quicker than pasteboard. Manufacturers who die-cut cardboard into shapes like this here use pasteboard to save wear on the die."

"But there are exceptions?"

"Never saw one before. But this disc is made with binders-board and it was cut with a die."

Norton's eyes brightened. At last he had discovered something unique about the black disc, something that might prove significant.

IT WAS ONLY five o'clock but the stars were out, the street lamps lighted.

"Let's go to a drugstore," said Norton. "I want to consult a telephone directory."

Jean Stacy released the clutch. The car swerved to avoid a delivery truck and bumped over the cobblestones. At the corner where Greenwood Lane emptied into Brickett Street, Jean slowed down. At this hour there was little traffic in the neighborhood. Its factories and warehouses were empty except for an occasional night watchman. Street lamps were the only source of light.

Again Jean released the clutch. The car had hardly moved a yard when she stamped on the brake. A big, black car without lights shot out of another side street parallel with Greenwood Lane. The car cut in front of Jean's compact, so close it almost grazed her radiator. Its door swung open. Something long, inert and shapeless fell before Jean's front wheels.

The black car gathered speed. Like a wraith it disappeared into the darkness without noise or lights. The license number was

veiled in shadow. But Norton recognized the now familiar silhouette of the Cadillac.

He pushed open the door beside him and tumbled out. Jean was at his heels.

"Don't come," he warned her. "This is going to be ugly."

She stammered. "It—it was a body, wasn't it?"

The headlights of the car shone like twin spotlights on a woman huddled face down in the roadway. Gently, Norton turned her over. Dark hair framed a pale face, thin and worn as a profile on an old coin. The eyes were glazed and vacant, the lips slightly parted. But she was still breathing.

"W-who is she?" Jean's shaking hand was on his shoulder.

"Marie Chester, the chambermaid whose story was suppressed." Norton was so angry that he forgot to be afraid. He would have made a splendid target kneeling in that blaze of light. But he wasn't thinking of that.

"Were we meant to find her?" whispered Jean, huskily.

"I don't believe in coincidence," Norton answered without looking up. Then he added, "Quick! We must drive to a hospital."

At the hospital Jean waited in an anteroom while Norton interviewed the chief surgeon. When he returned his face was as bleak as granite.

"Marie Chester is dead. She was horribly tortured first. She

insisted on leaving a written statement describing what she saw the night Diana Clark was murdered."

Jean Stacy caught her breath. "It's unbelievable that Benda would go to such extremes as to actually kill the girl."

"Benda wanted to silence a witness," Norton said. "He murdered in order to frighten other witnesses. These things do happen. Ask any police reporter. In the old days in New York she might have been sealed in a block of wet cement and dropped into the East River as soon as the cement had hardened. Its weight keeps a body from rising to the surface, so there's no evidence of murder."

"Benda doesn't care if there's evidence or not because the police department is under his thumb. There has to be a few honest cops or it wouldn't function at all. But most of the top brass snaps to attention when he puts in a phone call. I'm sure of it."

"He threatened you!" cried Jean. "You must leave Pearson City at once!"

Norton shook his head. "I thought I was pretty courageous defying Benda yesterday—the little tin hero! But now I see it differently. I was never really in danger. As I said this afternoon Benda would think twice before attacking an employee of the Syndicated Press. But my stubbornness put other people in danger—all the other obscure little people

without pull or money who are involved in the case, people whom Benda is not afraid to attack.

"That's what makes me angry! I'm responsible for what happened to Marie Chester. I'm going to get Benda if it's the last thing I ever do and I'm going to get him quickly before he has time to hurt anyone else."

Jean didn't hesitate. "I'm with you. What can I do?"

"Too dangerous."

"But—"

"No buts." Norton rose.

"Won't you tell me where you're going?"

"I'm going to take you home first."

"And then?"

"The less you know the safer you'll be. I want you to go home and stay there, no matter what happens."

"You'll let me know what happens?"

"By eight p.m. at the latest."

When Norton left Jean at her house his glance fell on the clock in the hall. It was just five fifty-four. Benda's ultimatum had expired.

Norton walked to the nearest cigar store. In the telephone booth he found a classified directory and made a list of the companies listed under *dies*. Altogether there were eleven. He thought longingly of Jean's little car, but it was too well-known to Benda's men by this time. He hailed a taxi and

set out to visit the die companies.

The first two were closed for the night. The third and fourth were still open but no one at either place recognized the black disc. The fifth was just closing as Norton reached the sales department.

"I need some information," he explained to a clerk. "I want to know if this disc was cut by one of your dies?"

The clerk looked at the black disc and frowned. "Another complaint? Do you think I have nothing better to do than listen to your bellyaching? The die we sold you would have lasted years if you'd used pasteboard like everybody else! No die in the world will stand up to bindersboard for any length of time!"

"Just a minute," Norton said. "That's not what I wanted to talk to you about."

"What else is wrong—?"

"Just tell me one thing," interrupted Norton. "What company has been using your dies to cut discs like this from bindersboard?"

The clerk stared in astonishment. "Don't you know? I thought you came from them!"

"Who is them?"

"Why, the Fur Workers Supply Company, of course!"

SAMUEL STERN of the Fur Workers Supply Company was just shutting up shop for the night. He received Norton in a low-ceilinged

room behind the shop. On the work table were the tools of the furrier's trade—rubber skulls and glass eyes for mounting fox heads, dyes and knives and needles and thread for working in fur, great bolts of heavy silk for lining fur coats, wadded cushions for lining muffs.

The little furrier was extremely cordial and invited Norton into his office.

"Can you tell me what this is?"

Stern took the black disc and smiled as if the question were absurdly simple. "It's a button fastener."

"And what is a button fastener?"

"A button is never sewed to a fur coat," explained Stern. "Fur skin is so tender that the pull of the threads would soon wear a hole in it. So you take a flat disc with slots on either side, pass a narrow piece of tape around the disc, through the slots and knot it. Then you cut a small slit in the fur skin and slide the disc in edge-wise. Once it is lodged between fur and lining you turn the disc so it lies flat and flush with the fur. Then the diameter is too wide for the disc to slip back through the slit it entered edgewise."

"The two ends of knotted tape hang down outside the slit on the fur side. They are passed through a loop on the underside of the button and knotted again. This holds the button firmly in place without

wearing a hole in the fur. We call such a disc a button fastener. As long as it is in place, the button cannot fall off."

"But if great force were exerted?" said Norton. "If someone seized a button and tugged with all his might? Wouldn't the flat side of the button fastener press against the slit in the fur until it was split wider? Then wouldn't button and tape and button fastener all come loose together and fall off the coat?"

Stern looked at Norton with eyes bright under bushy gray brows. "People don't often indulge in a rough and tumble when they're wearing fur coats."

"What if someone wearing a fur coat committed a murder and the victim seized a button in the death struggle?"

"It would happen just as you described it."

"And the button fastener might fall on the floor and roll away by itself?"

"Certainly, if the tape came unknotted." Stern touched the nameless clue—no longer nameless. "I have heard of buttons being found at the scene of a crime. But a button fastener is something new."

"One more question." Norton was tense as he leaned across the worn desk. "Is there any way of distinguishing this particular button fastener from all others so it can be traced to the coat from which it was torn?"

Stern held the disc under a desk lamp. "You may call it luck, but this particular button fastener is unusual. So unusual that I believe it might be traced to one particular coat."

"How?"

"Usually button fasteners are made of pasteboard or leather. Only one manufacturer of furriers' tools was ever foolish enough to make button fasteners of bindersboard—myself. My son is just out of college and full of bright ideas that won't work. This is one of them. Bindersboard makes fine button fasteners but it wore out our new die in a few days. We've gone back to pasteboard. So far we've only sold one sackful of button fasteners made from bindersboard. That sack went to Newton and Brill, retail furriers here in Pearson City. They are only a few blocks from here."

"They can give you a list of customers who have bought fur coats containing button fasteners made from bindersboard. As Newton and Brill only bought the sack a few weeks ago, there won't be many names on the list. Indeed the chances are that only one of those names will be connected with the murder you are investigating."

Norton looked at his watch. "The shop will be closed by this time. Can I reach Newton and Brill tonight?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait

until morning. I don't know their home addresses."

Norton was glad he had not dismissed his taxi. He was beginning to realize the folly of fighting Benda's gang single-handed. He needed help and the only man who could help him effectively was Kimball. The district attorney would have to listen to a man as influential as Clement Kimball. It would be time enough to interview Newton and Brill in the morning, but he must see Kimball and if possible the district attorney tonight before Benda made another move.

Kimball's house was near the Stacys' on the outskirts of the city. The house faced the state highway at the top of a little hill. It was a solid, red-brick building with a white porte-cochere at one side. Norton dismissed the taxi at the bottom of the hill and made his way up the starlit drive.

The front of the house was dark but there was an oblong of light shining on the snow from an unshaded French window on the right side. Norton noticed he had to pass the window on his way to the front door.

He came to the window and looked inside. The room beyond was a library. Lamplight shining on wine red damask chairs and curtains looked warm and inviting to Norton as he stood outside in the windy winter night. Kimball was relaxing in an armchair with

a book in one hand and a highball on the table beside him.

Mrs. Kimball had just come in from the street. She was casting her wraps aside on the sofa. As Norton watched she sank into a chair and lit a cigarette. They were talking but he could not hear what they said. It was like a scene from an old silent film.

Norton went on toward the front of the house and rang the bell. Kimball himself came to open the door.

"My dear Norton, what on earth are you doing here? You should have called. You're lucky to find me home this evening. Come right in! You look as if you could use a drink."

"I've had a busy and a tough time of it all day," said Norton. "And I just had to see you immediately."

Inside the comfortable living room Kimball turned to the reporter and said, "Mr. Norton—my wife."

Norton shook hands with Mrs. Kimball. She smiled and said, "I was just going to my room. I can see that you want to talk to Mr. Kimball. I'll leave you two together but I hope you can stay for dinner, Mr. Norton."

"Thanks—"

She left the room and they heard her go upstairs.

Kimball gestured Norton to a large wing-chair and then walked across the room and unlocked an

old-fashioned tantalus and brought out a cut glass whiskey decanter. Norton took a long pull at the drink Kimball handed him.

Kimball sat down behind his writing table and looked at Norton. "Well?"

"As I've just said, I've had a busy time," Norton said. "But I believe I've got the murderer."

Kimball was startled. "Are you sure? Suspicion is one thing and legal evidence another."

"Here's the evidence. You're a lawyer and you can tell me if I'm right or wrong." Norton produced the black disc. As he outlined its history Kimball grew more and more perturbed.

"Marie Chester has testified there was no black disc behind the radiator the morning before Diana Clark was murdered," said Norton. "Diana Clark didn't drop the button fastener herself because she didn't have a fur coat with her. I saw all her belongings at the district attorney's office. Her only coat was velveteen. The disc couldn't have been dropped by a man. Men don't wear fur coats. Or so rarely it can practically be ruled out.

"That eliminates two chief suspects—Daniel Forbes and Martin Stacy. It also rules out Max and Benda and the hotel men, bell-boys, detectives, policemen and reporters who visited the scene of the crime after the murder. There were no women detectives or

women reporters working on the case—that was one of Marie Chester's grievances. The only women who have visited the scene of the crime were the hotel maids and Jean Stacy. Maids don't wear fur coats when they're cleaning a room. Jean was wearing a tweed coat.

"Therefore, the button fastener must've been dropped at the scene of the crime by some other woman who had no legitimate business there and everything suggests that this woman was the murderer. Diana Clark was shot with a woman's gun—a twenty-two. Marie Chester saw a woman leave the Clark suite the night of the murder. She went down the corridor to the fire stairs and she was wearing a long, brown coat. It was doubtless a fur coat, though Marie didn't recognize it as fur in the dim light of the hotel corridor."

"It's quite plausible as far as it goes," said Kimball. "But there are so many women in Pearson City who own long, brown fur coats and this button fastener could have come from any one of them."

"Oh, no, it couldn't!" A gleam rekindled in Norton's tired eyes. "That's where I got a lucky break. That's why I'm here now. This particular button fastener is made of bindersboard instead of the usual pasteboard or leather. Only one retail furrier in Pearson City

has been using button fasteners of bindersboard—Newton and Brill. They've only been in use the last six weeks. It's a cinch Newton and Brill have sold only one fur coat in six weeks to a woman who knew Diana Clark.

"As soon as we see Newton and Brill in the morning we'll have the murderer's name in black and white. This little disc of bindersboard is going to send her to the chair. I might be sorry, if I hadn't seen Marie Chester after Leo Benda's gang got through with her."

"What did they do to her?" demanded Kimball.

Norton told him. Kimball's face, usually ruddy, turned deathly pale. He muttered incoherently, "Unspeakable . . . why did they also have to torture her!"

Norton nodded grimly. "Mrs. Forbes deserves all that's coming to her."

"Mrs. Forbes?" The name was a shock to Clement Kimball.

"What other woman had a motive for murdering Diana Clark? Mrs. Forbes was wearing a long, brown rabbit's fur coat when I saw her and she recognized the button fastener the moment she saw it. She's the sort of woman who would do anything to help her husband. Perhaps she rationalized the murder by telling herself she was protecting her child's future."

"No doubt, but—" Kimball

passed a shaking hand across his forehead. "I've known Nancy Forbes all my life! I'm not a criminal lawyer and I'm not used to this sort of thing." He rose. "I'd better phone the district attorney and see if he can come over at once. Excuse me—"

Alone, Norton finished his drink and helped himself to a cigarette from the box on Kimball's writing table. As his gaze wandered around the room he wondered if he would ever be successful enough to own a home like this where hidden lights brought out ruby highlights in the gleaming surface of wine-red damask and old mahogany. Out here on the edge of the city it was extraordinarily quiet and peaceful. He heard no sound but the moaning of the wind outside.

Suddenly, Alec Norton saw the telephone on Kimball's writing table—a perfectly ordinary dial telephone. Superficially, there was nothing alarming about it. But—Kimball had left the room in order to telephone the district attorney.

Why hadn't he phoned from here?

Norton put the receiver to his ear. He heard the dial tone. The instrument was not out of order.

He replaced the receiver. Again his glance swept the room but this time it was alert, puzzled, searching. On the surface everything seemed normal—green-

shaded reading lamp, book shelves rising row on row until they were lost in the shadows of the lofty ceiling, cut glass decanter of whiskey glinting amber and gold in the lamplight.

Norton's glance came to a halt. Mrs. Kimball's wraps were still lying on the sofa where she had cast them down—a brown fur hat, brown suede gloves, and the dark, supple mink coat she had worn at Kimball's office the first day he saw her. A long brown coat. A *fur* coat!

In four strides he crossed the room and seized the coat. Sewn to the rich brown satin lining was a label—*Newton and Brill*. In the pelt, under the button, where there should have been a neat slit, there was a wide, jagged tear. The button had been wrenched off and then replaced by someone ignorant of the furrier's craft.

The lips of the tear were roughly basted together with brown silk and the tape on the under side of the button had been sewn to the surface of the fur. There was no button fastener inside. But the other buttons were held in place properly by a tape passing through a neat slit in the pelt to the inside of the coat. Under each button Norton's probing fingers felt a round, flat disc concealed between fur and lining.

He snatched a pair of scissors from Kimball's writing desk and sawed at one of the slits until it

was two inches wide. Then he pulled the button. It parted company with the coat. On its under side, dangling from a loop of tape, was a button fastener—stiff and black, with a smooth, hard-rolled finish. Bindersboard!

A loud report shattered the stillness. Norton looked up. A bullet splintered a Florentine mirror on the opposite wall. The jagged glass distorted the reflection of a woman.

Margaret Kimball stood in the doorway behind Norton. She was aiming a small revolver at his back—a .22. Her painted mouth was crimson against cheeks that had gone chalk white. But the hand that held the gun was steady.

"You fool!" Her voice was as firm as her hand. "I heard everything you said to my husband. I came downstairs in my stocking feet and listened at the door. As soon as you mentioned the button fastener, I knew that you had to die."

Norton summoned all his self-control. "Won't you have trouble explaining a dead body in your living room?"

"My husband opened the door for you. The servants will swear they didn't admit you by the front door. I'll swear you attacked me and I shot you in self-defense."

"I see." Norton's thoughts were racing. Any woman like Nancy Forbes who did all her own sewing and mending might recognize

the black disc as a button fastener from a fur coat without knowing what particular fur coat it came from. She must have thought Norton knew the disc was a button fastener from a fur coat. She was wearing a fur coat herself and she had a motive for murdering Clark. She had been frightened for fear he would accuse her of the murder on the strength of those two things.

Lamplight struck a steady beam of light from a diamond ring on the hand that held the gun. Norton fixed his eyes on that beam. If he could say something to make it waver, just once.

He spoke calmly, almost conversationally. "So your husband was the man who loved Diana Clark—the rich man she wanted to marry. And you shot her because you were jealous."

"He never loved her!" Margaret Kimball's voice sharpened shrewishly. "That Clark woman was a passing fancy—nothing more!"

"Then why did you kill her?"

"Because she wanted him to divorce me and marry her. And he was so weak he might have done it!"

"You call that a passing fancy?" Norton managed to laugh.

"Kim wouldn't have protected me after I shot Diana Clark if he hadn't loved me!"

"Kimball wanted to be a United States Senator," said Norton. "The *Star* said so in its first story

on Martin Stacy's arrest. A man whose wife has murdered his lover hasn't a ghost of a chance of getting into the Senate. But do you suppose Kimball loved you after your crime forced him to frame his junior partner, in order to save you and himself?

"Kimball no more loved you than Leo Benda who only protected you because his racket depended on your husband's political machine for police protection. Your husband framed Stacy to save his career—not to save you! He must have hated you!"

"That's a lie!" The diamond ring flashed like a tiny heliograph. Her hand was shaking uncontrollably.

All in one motion, Norton turned and crouched and dived at her knees. A second shot rang out, reverberating in the closed room. Something as biting as a whiplash stung Norton's neck. She was struggling in his grasp, lithe and fierce as a snake. The hand that held the gun twisted toward him. He grabbed at it and missed. He saw the muzzle aimed at his forehead. It was so close now he could smell the acrid fumes of cordite.

He heard voices and footsteps. A woman's foot in a high-heeled shoe streaked into his range of vision and kicked Margaret Kimball's hand. She screamed. Her fingers relaxed. The gun skated across the rug beyond her reach.

"Alec!" It was Jean's voice. "Are you hurt?"

"No." Norton struggled to his feet. "What are you doing here?"

There were three men with Jean. Two of them lifted Margaret Kimball to her feet and snapped cuffs on her wrists.

"You said you'd come at eight." Jean's voice was taut and brittle. "When you didn't come, I got worried. I knew the city police were under Benda's thumb, so I phoned the district attorney, and—Oh, Alec!" Tears were in her eyes, "It seems the district attorney suspected Aunt Margaret all along. So we came here."

One of the men interrupted. "I'm John Bates, district attorney, Mr. Norton. It was Kimball, not Mrs. Kimball we suspected. We knew there was a man higher up in Benda's racket—some solid citizen with political pull and no obvious underworld ties. We thought Kimball was the man but we couldn't prove it. That's why we didn't arrest Benda. We wanted Kimball, too."

"You'll never get him!" Margaret Kimball stood between two county detectives, reckless and defiant.

"We have got him," said the district attorney. "When I heard Miss Stacy's story I sent men to patrol the highway where it crosses the border a few miles south of this house. I thought Kimball would try to escape that way if

things got too tough for him—and he did. He talked plenty when we nabbed him. He hadn't known that Benda planned to torture and then murder Marie Chester."

John Bates turned to Mrs. Kimball. "When Norton told your husband, it broke his nerve. When Norton explained the significance of the button fastener, Mr. Kimball realized the jig was up. He phoned a warning to Benda and made for the Mexican border in his fastest car. We caught Benda on the same road and now we're rounding up the rest of the gang."

Margaret Kimball's face worked wryly. "He warned Benda, but he left me to face all this alone—without warning me." She lifted tragic eyes to Norton. "You were right. He hated me."

Jean Stacy drew Norton out into the hall. The air was fresher there. "You've saved my brother," she said simply.

"And you saved me." He looked at her quizzically. "Didn't I say something earlier this evening about your going home and staying there, no matter what happened?"

"But I couldn't!" she said. "I felt you were in danger and I was afraid you'd be hurt!"

"Did that make so much difference to you?"

Jean colored. Her lips were trembling but she forced them to smile. "What do you think?" she asked Alec Norton.

THE GIRL ON THE SECOND FLOOR

by HARRY C. ROBERT

*He got the job he coveted
in an ugly way . . . and left
Death to do the tidying up.*



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WHEN MY WIFE walked out on me I hit the sauce and went on a three-day bender. I must have made every cheap gin mill in Cleveland. I came to about night-fall the third day when I was thrown out of a joint down at the end of Euclid Avenue. That shook me up. I may not be Ivy League, but I'm not that far down either.

I turned out my pockets and after the price of a bus ticket to Buffalo I had about nineteen dollars left. So I took off.

I used to live in Buffalo for awhile, so I knew my way around. But it still took me the better part of a week to find what I wanted. But I found it. Just about right, too—a medium-small building on Delaware Avenue, not too far up-town. It was what I was looking for. Not too big, about twelve rooms—they called them apartments—easy to take care of. But somebody else was in the job.

I hit the owner anyway.

"The guy I got is all right," he said. "He's a good man, long as he lets liquor alone. That's the only thing that worries me a little. I can't trust him out of sight once he starts drinking. He's fine when he behaves himself. But let him get one drop down his gullet and he's through. He's been taking care of himself pretty good lately and I hope he won't have any more trouble. He's a good Joe when he's on the wagon. Anything happens, though, I'll keep you in mind."

"Will you?" I asked.

"Didn't I say so?"

I knew that wouldn't do me any good, so I looked the guy up. He was a real nice fellow. Big guy, pleasant round face, real friendly.

"Hello," he said. "Looking for somebody?"

"Looking for a job like this," I said. "I used to take care of a building in Toledo. I hit town a couple of days ago, and thought I might locate something."

"Ain't a bad town," he said, "if you can stand the winters."

"Can't be worse than Chicago," I said. "I was out there a couple of years."

"Pretty bad when the wind and snow come off the lake."

"Don't know a place about like this that could use a man, do you?"

"Can't rightly say I do. Ain't many like this around."

"How long you had this?"

"Close to a year now. And I aim to be here a few more. It's a comfortable place. Boss ain't hard to please, so long as you keep your nose clean."

"You hear about a spot like it, lemme know."

"How'm I gonna let you know?"

"I'll double-check you," I said.

I had about seven bucks left out of my nineteen. I didn't have any time to fool around. I made out on an egg sandwich and a cup of Java that night and then I bought a pint. Next afternoon I stopped by again.

"Hi," he says. "Locate anything?"

"Nothing but nothing," I said. "You sure you don't know a similar place I could try?"

"Wish I could for your sake. Why don't you try down the docks? You might catch on loading grain. Only the season's out now. The lake's still froze tight."

"I don't want a dock job. This is the kind of place I'd like."

"Better look some other neighborhood then. Ain't nothing in this area I can bring to mind."

I brought out the pint from my pocket, unscrewed the top and took a drink. I held it out to him.

His eyes glistened and he licked his lips. "I better not," he said.

"What's the matter?"

"Sort of gives me trouble, mostly."

"Well, in that case, you're right. Better not."

I tilted it up to my lips like I was drinking again but I was tonquing the bottle and nothing went down my throat. Then I put it back in my pocket.

"Getting colder out there," I said. "Little nip sort of helps in this weather."

"Thass right," he agreed.

He took a look at the heater. It was a cinch, an oil burner with a thermostat a baby could have run.

"Might better give 'em a little more heat if it's turning off cold," he said.

"Right," I said.

I brought the bottle out again, put it to my mouth and tilted it. Then I took it down, put the cap back on and put it away. He watched it like it was the fourth ace in the deck and he had one in the hole.

"Gonna get pretty cold tonight," I said. "Little drink feels good in this weather."

He didn't say anything.

After awhile I pulled the bottle

again and went through the motions of having another shot.

"Maybe just—" he said and stopped.

"No, I wouldn't if it don't agree with you," I said.

"Just a nip wouldn't hurt if it's gonna be cold."

"Yeah, you've got something there. Just a little one, then."

I handed him the bottle. He turned it up and took a short drink.

"Oil burner don't warm a basement up good like an old coal furnace used to," he said. "Man can stand a little something to warm his insides down here."

"You said it." I tilted the bottle again but didn't drink.

This time I didn't put the bottle away. After a few minutes he held out his hand for it. This time he took a real drink.

Then we passed it back and forth. I didn't drink but he did. In less than an hour it was empty. He'd had the whole pint except the first drink I'd taken. He staggered when he went to look at the thermostatic control.

"Why don't you take a little rest?" I asked him.

The door to his little room was open. I led him in and put him down on the single bed. He mumbled something about a few winks and turned over. I went outside the room and waited a few minutes. When I looked in again he was asleep.

I went over to the thermostat. I had in mind dropping it down and cooling the place off but when I looked at it I had a better idea. I pushed it up close to 90, which was more like what a drunk would do with the cold coming in.

I stepped outside. You know Buffalo. It was getting colder when I came in, like I said, but it was still bright and sunny. Now the sky was all smoke-gray and the snow was coming down. That's the way it is up there. It snows before you can drop the hat.

I walked around in it for about an hour and a half. Then I went back into the basement. He was still asleep. There were a few drops left in the bottle. I spilled them over his collar and shirt and laid the bottle by him on the bed.

Then I went just outside the street door and waited. I figured something would happen soon.

It did. Before long I heard the door from the apartments upstairs open and the owner yelled, "Hey, Grimm, what the hell's going on down there? The place is steaming."

I let him hear me open the door and came in like from the outside.

"Hello," I called. "Where are you, Jake?"

"Who's that?" yelled the owner.

"It's me," and I got where he could see me.

"Oh, you," he said. "I remember you, asking for a job."

"Where's Jake?" I asked.

"That's what I want to know. The place is cooking."

"What do you mean?"

"It's hotter up there than the hinges of hell. I want to find Jake, so he can see what's wrong."

"Come on, let's take a look."

I wanted him down to see everything for himself. When he got down the steps I walked over to the control.

"Well, no wonder," I said in big surprise. "He's got this thing shoved up nearly to ninety."

"What?" he screamed.

"See for yourself," I said. "Here, I'll take care of it. Man, that could be dangerous. He could blow his boilers that way."

"Where is he?" he screeched.

I knew he'd find out soon enough, so I let him look for himself. He went to the open door of the room and there was Jake, dead to the world.

The owner went in, saw him, saw the bottle and said, "That does it. I gave him every chance, but he can't let the stuff alone. When he comes near blowing up the place, he's finished."

P. S. I got the job. It was a lousy trick, but I wanted in.

Like he said, it was a real nice, comfortable spot. My little basement room wasn't anything you'd entertain Queen Elizabeth in, but it was good enough for me. The work was a cinch. All I had to do was regulate the heater, look after a few big lockers where the people

upstairs could keep their bags or trunks if they didn't want them in their rooms, keep the halls upstairs clean and take out the trash every day.

I didn't even have to worry about the rooms. They had a housekeeper sleeping in the end room on the second floor who did them. She made a pass or two at me the first two days I was on the job, but she was a slob. I let her alone and then she let me alone.

The owner lived in the front apartment on the third floor corner and that was about the only one you could really call an apartment.

I saw it one day when Maggie, the housekeeper, was cleaning it up. A big room with heavy red curtains and one of those big over-size beds with the same heavy red covers, big easy chairs and couches, a 24-inch blond mahogany TV set, leopard skin rugs and things. A fancy bath you could run the four-forty in and a classy kitchenette and dinette.

He was a bachelor, Maggie told me, and a handsome devil as I'd seen for myself—tall, slim, dark hair and eyebrows, very grey eyes, a skin like an Indian's even in this weather, and that casual way that knocks the women dead. Where he got his money I don't know but he had it. He stayed off my back as long as I did my work and I stayed out of his way.

The third day I saw the girl on

the second floor but she didn't see me.

The job didn't pay much but there was no reason it should. The heater control was as simple as any in a home. The control was down in the basement but it worked off a thermostat up in the hall, just about in the center of the building. I spent most of my time lying around on my bed, reading paperback books and magazines.

The only time I went up into the building was during the early afternoon, when Maggie was finishing up the rooms. She'd leave the trash outside the doors, and I would make sure the halls were clean and take the stuff down and empty it in barrels outside, and bring the containers back upstairs.

There weren't any rooms on the ground floor. That had a couple of offices and a small bar and restaurant on the corner, but I had nothing to do with them. They weren't even connected with the upstairs rooms. From the middle of the second floor a long stairway led down between the restaurant and offices into the basement where I stayed.

Going along with Maggie from day to day you'd get some idea of the people in the place without ever knowing them. Maggie was a young, strong woman, a little fat, and she couldn't move without yakking. Listening to her and even allowing for those she liked and

the ones she didn't like you got to feel as if you knew them.

Maggie was the second floor back. Next to her was a little old lady but not like the little old lady in the song passing by. This one was a grandmother still trying to be flaming youth. She painted up and yellowed up her hair and made the bars if she could get anybody to buy.

In the room next to her was a waiter. His wife slept in most of the day and in the afternoon when he went to work she went to the movies. Then there was the girl. Then a big, strapping guy, a lineman with the telephone company. Then in front a B-girl at one of the downtown bars. Maggie said she was the best looking girl anywhere around. She slept until noon or after, went out early in the afternoon to eat and walk around and then came in and read until it was time to bathe and dress and go to work at night.

In the third floor back was a linotyper on *The News*. He went to work early in the morning. Then a floater who'd come in from Syracuse a couple of weeks before and would move on, nobody knew when. Then a bartender from a place up Main Street. Then a vacancy and then the owner's layout took up the whole third floor front.

Once in awhile I'd see some of these people, like one night I saw the B-girl starting out to work and I guess you could call her the pret-

tiest girl around if you liked that style. A silver blonde with a round baby face—nice in a regular way but empty.

The grandmother was a clown. Anybody would spend money on her must be turning it out on his own presses. But I mostly stayed out of their way and didn't go up into the building except the times I was pretty sure they'd be out. I didn't want the girl on the second floor to see me in a job like that.

When we'd be going through the place, cleaning it up and straightening up, Maggie would go into her monologue. She knew all about the other tenants. She labeled the telephone lineman for a great guy and while she didn't say it I pretty soon suspected she developed that impression in bed. She didn't like the waiter, because she thought he beat his wife. The linotyper and the barkeep weren't around much.

The only time anybody saw the floater was when he got up and started out in the mornings and Maggie thought he was a card sharp. But she said he wasn't a bad fellow and quite a comic.

Once in awhile I'd ask a question about somebody but I didn't ask any about the girl. I let Maggie take her own sweet time to tell about her. She did, all right. She said the girl hadn't been with them long. She'd grown up in Buffalo and then she went away and now she was back, working in one of

the department stores. Maggie said her name was Catherine and they all called her Caddie. It seemed just right for her.

I stayed away from her. I wasn't going to foul things up by trying to mix with any of them. But sometimes I'd watch for her when she'd go out to eat after coming back from work at night. There weren't any cooking arrangements except in the owner's apartment. Everybody went out to eat. They had breakfast in the little corner restaurant but usually they'd go other places for dinner.

I could get across the street under the trees along the sidewalk and see her light go out in her room and then in a little while she'd come out and I'd see her walk up the street with the arc light throwing a thin, flickering sparkle on her hair and her hips swaying under her coat wrapped tight around her and the smooth muscles in her legs below her skirt.

I'd watch her going up the other side of the street as far as I could see her. Then I'd go back to my room and lie on the bed awhile and try to read. But I'd think about the way she walked and her slim legs and how every move she made almost ran you crazy.

She was out all day, so I didn't have to worry about bumping into her in there. The others weren't around much, either, and it was pretty dark along the hall, even in the daytime. If any of them came



along when I was sweeping or carrying out the trash I sort of looked the other way and shuffled along and made myself scarce and nobody noticed me. Maggie and the owner were the only ones ever really saw me.

Then one time when Maggie was out shopping and nobody at all was around I got the long magnesium ladder from down in the basement and took it up and

changed the bulbs in the hall so they were dimmer. Then you couldn't really see anything very plain. Maggie didn't even notice it; she was dumb as an ox, anyway.

Sometimes when we would be up there cleaning up the place, I'd stop with her in the girl's room for a couple of minutes like going on with some conversation we were having and then I would smell her perfume hanging over the dresser and see her stockings and things where she had thrown them over a chair and the blood would start thumping in my neck and head.

Another thing that got me, they were all pretty friendly together up there. I'd hear them and I got to where I'd leave the door to the basement open a crack and I'd stand there and listen and hear them calling to each other around the halls when they were getting out in the mornings.

The guy from Syracuse would make funny cracks and I'd hear her laugh, high and light and gay, like running water, and sometimes she'd say something back in that happy-sounding voice as she'd go downstairs on her way out. Then I'd wonder if she went out with him sometimes or if she saw him upstairs and everything would go sort of hazy and I'd feel the pulse in my temples and it would be a long time before I'd feel all right again.

It got so I didn't feel much like

eating, thinking about her and her short, curly hair and her narrow hips and the way she walked. I didn't drink anymore, either.

Then I began to slip up into the halls at night when everything was quiet, sliding along and listening at some of the doors to see if I could hear her anywhere. I never did hear anything, though.

It was getting along toward spring, which you could tell by the calendar but nothing else. Until one morning the lineman had gone out early for something and I was sort of listening, especially for her, on the way to work, when I heard him come busting in and go running up the stairs. "Jeez," he yelled. "It's nice out!"

It wouldn't happen anywhere but Buffalo, where summer is such a short season, July Fourth. So now spring was coming in. I wasn't supposed to leave the place except for a good reason but now when I watched her going out at night, I began to follow along behind her a way.

I went just far enough to watch her walk along in her spring dresses, tight around her hips and thighs, her legs flashing in the brittle arc light flickering through the trees. It was just like she sent out electricity, every step she took.

The joker from Syracuse had moved on, so he didn't bother me anymore. Once in awhile she'd walk out with the lineman at night and I'd watch for them when that

happened. But he'd either come back first by himself or she would. I'd wonder abut it anyway and then I'd listen outside his door in the night. But I never heard her.

Then late one afternoon Maggie came down and opened the basement door and yelled for me and I said what did she want and she said the owner wanted to see me. I went up and knocked on his door and he called for me to come in.

He was laying back in one of his big chairs in a silk bathrobe, with a drink on a little table by him and a record player going nice and low with music. He really had it made.

"Have a drink?" he said.

"No, thank you."

"You don't drink, do you?"

"Not much," I said.

"You're better off. What I wanted to see you about, have you seen anybody hanging around this place?"

"How do you mean?"

"A prowler or anybody might cause us trouble?"

"I haven't noticed. I don't get outside too much."

"We got a girl on the second floor—well, we got two girls down there, in fact. But the one I'm talking about is the girl they call Cadie."

Everything turned over inside, but I didn't move a muscle. "I don't know any of 'em but I think I know the room she's got. About the middle of the floor down there?"

"That's the one."

I waited for him to go on and after a few seconds he said, "She kind of thinks somebody's been watching her around here. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"Who is it?"

"She just seems to think somebody."

"What would they do that for?"

"I don't know. I don't know if somebody's watching her at all. You know how girls are. She may be dreaming it. But try to keep a look out and see if you find anybody suspicious hanging around."

"I don't get much chance to get out but I'll do the best I can."

So I went back down to the basement and he'd done me a big favor. Now I could tail along and watch her and if anybody ever asked me anything I could always say he'd asked me to keep an eye on her.

Now things were quieter in the morning. There wasn't much jolly talk up in the halls when everybody was starting out. There weren't any funny cracks from the Syracuse guy and you didn't hear her bubbly laugh. She just went out sort of silent.

Couple of days later Maggie and I were working up there and she says, "The place don't seem the same lately."

"Whats the matter with it?"

"Oh, I don't know exactly. Since Jack moved on it ain't so pleasant

around here. And Caddie's getting awful nervous."

"You mean the girl in that room? What's she nervous about?"

"She says somebody around here is watching her. You ain't seen anybody around shouldn't be here, have you?"

"No, I haven't. What about the other girl, the one up front?"

"You mean Esther? She ain't said anything but she ain't got enough brains so she'd know it, anyway. Oh, she's a nice girl, all right. But she's got the personality of a dead fish. Caddie's different. She says she ain't really seen anybody but she can feel somebody's around. She says she can feel things like that. She's got imagination, Caddie has."

"Maybe shes got too much."

"No, she ain't like that. I know it sounds funny but she's that way, she says she can just feel it even if she ain't seen him."

"I'll keep a look out for anybody," I said.

"I wish you would, honest. I don't like to see that sweet little girl so scared."

That made two of them and it really gave me the green light but I decided to lay off for a few days. I just stayed put in the basement, but it was tough, lying there and thinking about her and the way she looked and walked, her shiny hair and smooth legs, and wondering if she went out with the guys up there..

Finally one night I stood in the basement door to the street and watched her go walking up toward Main Street and I sort of hung around later to see her come back. But I didn't see her or hear her and I figured she must have come in before I was looking for her.

So I stepped across the street and looked up at her window. But there wasn't any light in her room and I kept waiting and listening and I never heard her come back. I laid there on my bed but I couldn't sleep and all I did was think about her.

It was that way all night, until about four o'clock in the morning I couldn't stand it anymore, so I tiptoed upstairs and listened at the lineman's door. I could hear him snoring and then I listened at her door but I didn't hear anything. Then I heard a door open on the third floor.

I scuttled back and from the top of the basement stairs I could just about see the front of the hall on the third floor because it was all open up that side. In the light from the owner's room I saw them standing there in a clinch and then she kissed him again and turned around and came to the stairs and tiptoed down, holding her dress together with one hand and carrying her shoes in the other.

After that I didn't try to sleep anymore.

And then I didn't listen for her anymore or watch for her in the

evenings. I just stayed down in the basement and never left it unless I had to, helping Maggie or something like that.

Everything was real quiet around there until four days later. I was ready to move on, just waiting one more day for payday so I'd have some money to take with me. It was early night again, just after the time most everybody went out for dinner when I heard the door to the basement open and the owner and Maggie talking.

"I don't see how he'd know anything," she said. "He don't go out much."

"I know," he said, "but we'd better ask him, anyway."

"I can't understand it," she said. "All her clothes and things still up there."

They were coming down the stairs but I'd heard them and I slipped over to the door to the street and stood just outside it, where I could still hear them but they couldn't see me.

"Where the hell is he?" he asked and yelled for me.

After a little wait, Maggie said, "He ain't in his room. Maybe he just stepped out for something."

"Watch for him, will you? And when he gets back, ask him to come up. But I don't suppose he knows anything, anyway."

They started away and then Maggie gave a real loud sniff and said, "What's that?"

"What's what?"

"That smell," Maggie said.

Then he sniffed. "Yeah," he said. "That is something. What's he keeping down here?"

"Whatever it is, it's gone bad," she said. I heard her walking across the floor again, "It ain't in his room. It ain't so bad over here."

"I wish he'd get back. I want to ask him about this, too. Look around and see if you can locate it."

They walked around the floor here and there and then he said, "Whoo! It's terrible over here."

She walked over and said, "I'll say it is."

"It's in here," he said. "He must have something in one of these lockers. Help me open it."

I heard them working on the door and a creaking sound and then I heard my wife fall out on the floor and Maggie screeched.

"Good God," he said.

"Saints preserve us," she yelled. "It's Caddie."

"With a belt around her neck," he said hoarsely.

That's when I left.

So here I am, pounding the Thruway. Heading for New York. It may not be easy getting out when they open up to unload but I'll just be a bum hitching a ride. Or maybe I can sneak out like I sneaked in.

I was just walking to get away from the place when I came across this van they were loading up on

a moving job. I heard them say they were off for New York as soon as they were loaded and when they went in to get one of the heavy pieces, with the thing about half loaded, I slipped in and scrounged down in a little space behind one of the big chairs.

After a long time they got it loaded and locked the doors and we've been rolling through the night ever since.

I don't know just what I'll do when I get there. Maybe hitch another ride off to somewhere. East, west, north, south, it won't matter to me. Or maybe I can ship out on a boat.

I know they'll get me sometime but you have to run, that's the way it is. And I had to do it. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't do anything. Except what I did.

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Suddenly she had an almost irresistible desire to run from the boy in . . .

THE PORK PIE HAT

by
BRYAN
EDGAR WALLACE

IT WAS SPRING, and she had a new dress, new shoes, and a bubbling excitement which made her want to dance and skip along the pavement. No day had ever been so wonderful, no air so fresh,

and even the colors of the old High Street seemed gay and bright. It was Spring and she was seventeen.

She was not very pretty, but the freshness and exhilaration of youth made her glow, and several of the elderly people smiled sympathetically as she passed, teetering along uncertainly on her new high heels.

Once she turned her head and, out of the corner of her eye, looked behind her. But she was disappointed, and a little of her excitement faded and some of the color went out of the day.

She stopped and looked in a shop window full of office safes, a remarkably dull choice for a young girl so proudly decked out in her new Spring dress. The truth was that she hardly knew the safes were there. She was anxiously watching the street behind in its reflection in the plate glass window.

Her heart sang again. There he was. The shy young man in the pork pie hat. He was loitering at another shop window not fifty feet behind her, and definitely, but definitely, he once looked in her direction.

She examined her reflection anxiously in the glass and for once she was not quite so disappointed, although if only she had long, slinky blonde hair like Brigitte Bardot, or something under her blouse that she did not have to

buy in a shop, and who had ever heard of a real vamp type with soft brown eyes?

But all the same, she said to herself, she had obviously got *something*. Obviously the young man in the pork pie hat did not think that *everything* was hopeless. After all! he had been following her for at least twenty minutes—regretfully she made a slight revision; even if she had crawled it would not have taken her more than five minutes to get from the point where she had first noticed him. But she was quite certain that he was following her, at least she was almost certain. No, she said firmly to herself, she was certain.

After all, when she had stopped to look in the flower shop (and what could have been more natural) he had given her a long look as he passed. And then he had stopped at a chemist's shop, so that she could catch up, and what possible reason could he have had for looking in a chemist's shop?

And he looked such a nice young man, a bit old, of course, all of twenty two, but he looked a serious kind of boy, rather solemn and sweet. She giggled. Mother would be furious, this was just the kind of thing she kept on saying she mustn't do. But it was broad daylight, and there obviously wasn't a *thing* to worry about.

She glanced at him surreptitiously again out of the corner of

her eye. She thought his little pork pie hat was divine. He was so well dressed too, obviously a gentleman, this wasn't the kind of person her mother meant. She knew what her mother had been worried about; that dreadful man who had been going round strangling young girls. But that man was obviously a monster, and not a nice, shy young man.

This young man was just the kind she could take home, and her mother would be delighted. After all, she was now rising eighteen. She knew someone nice when she saw him, she would never get caught by some horrible, mad, old man who murdered young girls. Besides, that type wouldn't be seen in the middle of High Street when the sun hadn't even set.

Yes, she said to herself firmly, Mr. Pork Pie Hat was just the kind of boy her mother would approve of. She giggled to herself again, gave her reflection a quick, bright, approving look and walked on—but not too fast.

Twice she stopped to look unseeing at shop window displays, and each time, she saw, he stopped as well, obviously too shy and nervous to come up and speak to her. He was a shy young man. Now she knew definitely that he was following her, and she knew that he knew that she knew.

She had read somewhere about girls dropping handkerchiefs or gloves to make things easy, and al-

though she went as far as getting her handkerchief out of her bag, her nerve failed her. After all, it was up to him to do something.

At last, the moment she had dreaded came: she had arrived at the street where she had to turn off the High Street towards home. This would decide it. Would he turn and follow her, or would he go straight on?

She played weakly with the idea of walking straight on down the High Street, and taking a longer way home, but if he was going to give up now he would give up later.

She turned into the quiet street and walked slowly on. Here there were no shop windows to periscope behind, and finally she was reduced to crossing the street so that she could look behind her without being noticed.

Her heart leapt. He was following her. She was so excited that she tripped over the curb, and almost fell. The high heels were very new.

One hundreds yards, two hundred yards. Now there was nothing to stop him coming up to her. Why, there were hardly any people at all, but one quick, would-be casual glance showed that he was still the same distance behind.

A thought struck her; instead of going home the usual way, she could cut through the park, it wasn't really very much longer, and it was so much nicer. She gig-

gled. It wasn't the kind of thing she should do, but the fact that he was so shy showed how right it all was.

If he had been one of those horrible pushing boys, he would have come right up to her in the High Street, but he was sweet, and obviously felt just as nervous and excited about it all as she did.

The entrance to the park came closer and closer, and, as it did, her excitement and indecision rose. Going into the park her mother would never agree to. *Never*. But he was such a nice, solemn, shy young man. There was nothing to worry about, it wasn't really late, and it was still quite light.

After all, no one had ever told her not to go through the park. Why, only last week she came home through the park. She wasn't doing it for him, it was something she often did.

Fifty yards! Forty yards! Ten yards! She was there! She turned into the park.

For a moment she could only hear her own light steps on the gravel, and then, with a surge of excitement, she heard the crunch of his feet as he turned in from the street.

She was dying to turn round, but she forced herself to walk steadily ahead. For a while the footsteps behind her sounded the same, but as they got deeper into the park, the sound behind her changed, and she knew that he had lengthened his stride and was catching up to her.

Suddenly she had an almost irresistible desire to run. It was not exactly fear, but rather the full realization of what she was doing. She could feel her heart pounding, and knew that she had flushed a bright pink.

She had a tiny fleeting memory of all those horrid stories of girls who had been strangled, but that was absolute nonsense—he was a sweet young man.

Now he was very close, and she could hear him breathing, and she knew that he was just as excited as she was.

She giggled again, but this time it was slightly hysterical. What would her mother say?

Now he was almost up to her.

Two hands closed round her throat. She tried to scream, but she had no breath.

The last thing she saw was the pork pie hat rolling on the ground.

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